

## DRAWING LANGUAGE

### MARILYN SYMMES

*Drawing...gives thought and feeling a direct access to visibility. The tools are simple...something to make a mark, an eraser, a sheet of paper. Each material has a particular quality, the choice of which gives a drawing its "color."...Drawing can present conclusions. It can contain the results of an investigation into the nature of relationships. Or it can be the clear declaration of a complex idea....Drawing is also a process of testing differences. In the process of questioning distinctions, the mind, eye, and hand sometimes shift in and out of synchronization. Speculation, or the suspension of decision, leads below the surface of order into the ambiguity of conflicting perceptions. Drawing becomes a meditation on the meaning of certainty...*

Artist's statement in *Mel Bochner: Twenty-Five Drawings* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1981)

*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 non-objective thing we have ever developed in this world, never stops.*

Lawrence Weiner, quoted in interview with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998)

*Ut picture poesis... [As is painting so is poetry...]*

Horace, *Ars Poetica*, ca. 15 BCE

Mel Bochner's succinct definition of drawing and Lawrence Weiner's insight about language serve as apt starting points for the exhibition *Art=Text=Art: Works by Contemporary Artists*, which explores affinities between the visual and verbal in contemporary art from the 1960 to the present. What Bochner and Weiner express is fundamental to our understanding of the universal human drive for creative expression and communication. These statements are part of a continuum of art historical inquiry that began at the dawn of drawing, printing, and book production. Indeed, as the passage from the ancient Roman poem by Horace suggests, the dialoguing relationship between art and verse is a time-honored one.

Centuries of creative thinkers, following the example of the Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci, have made sketches or jotted notations as their starting points for artistic achievements, architectural monuments, scientific discoveries, and technological inventions. In the 1568 edition of his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects...*, the Italian

artist and architect Giorgio Vasari defined *disegno* [drawing, or design] as "the animating principle that conceives and nourishes all intellectual processes" and as the "parent of our three arts, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting."<sup>1</sup> He also wrote, "What design needs, when it has derived from the judgment the mental image of anything, is that the hand, through study and practice of many years, may be free and apt to draw and to express correctly...whatever nature has created. For when the intellect puts forth refined and judicious conceptions, the hand which has practiced design for many years, exhibits the perfection and excellence of the arts as well as the knowledge of the artist."<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Vasari, drawing became the vital core of artistic practice; he also promoted appreciation of drawings among collectors. Today, drawing is still required as a foundational skill for any aspiring art stu-

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Vasari, quoted in Beth L. Holman, ed., *Disegno: Italian Renaissance Designs for the Decorative Arts* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, 1997), 4.

<sup>2</sup> L. Maclehorse, trans., in G.B. Brown, ed., *Vasari on Technique* (London, 1907/R New York, 1960).

dent, and actively practiced by both professional and amateur artists. Between Vasari's day and ours, reinforced by contemporary declarations such as Bochner's, drawings and prints are a vibrant visual language, which transcends nationality, chronological time, and geography in distributing knowledge or subjective perspectives.

We exist in an ever-expanding universe of images and texts, thanks to an increasing number of art-making processes, technologies, and the Internet. Yet drawing and writing persist as private, intimate acts—as do looking and reading—serving to stimulate engagement with the realm of thought. Artists still use drawing as a way to gain insight into reality or to imagine what might be possible; what they create can be inspiring to behold.

During the second half of the twentieth century, artists and writers devised innovative ways of making thought visible as they probed various perceptual and intellectual issues, rejecting methods and ideologies of the past. They also experimented with both traditional and unconventional methods for creating art and adapted recent technologies to artistic purpose.

This exhibition of 109 drawings, prints, and artists' books by 48 contemporary artists features letterforms, words, and passages of text that invite engagement in verbal/visual interplay. Some drawings display remarkable gestural strokes that mimic writing, yet remain illegible. Other works focus on numbers or other symbols, or on such ordering systems as linear rows, grids, and geometric shapes. Several drawings diagram or map out what is complicated to explain. A few works offer meditations on color or the expanse of unmarked "blank" sheets, such as Ed Ruscha's *Suspended Sheet Stained with Ivy* (1973), which presents a single page floating like a magic carpet poised for an imaginative journey. Sometimes reading the words, as in William Anastasi's *Untitled (READING A LINE ON THE WALL)* of 1967/1977, is

just about focusing on the form and objective meaning of the words themselves. Mostly, however, "reading" the artworks displayed here encourages thinking about literature, science, passing time, aspects of daily life, and much more.

The 2012 presentation of *Art=Text=Art* at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University opens with pioneering works by such now-iconic artists as Carl Andre, Mel Bochner, Jasper Johns, Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra, Cy Twombly, and Lawrence Weiner, all of whom were at the forefront of the most significant art developments of the 1960s and early 1970s. Their artistic investigations of language, form, and space at that time and since have powerfully influenced the course of American art. Often they created art that required first engaging with ideas or conceptual statements, and then looking at the material realization of the object or installation. These and other artists also explored systems of order and sequential variants that often encompassed the realm of numbers and elementary geometry. As a result, new philosophical perspectives were introduced into contemporary art. This exhibition is in part a tribute to these profound artistic contributions and their legacy.

The majority of the works in this exhibition were created after the late 1980s. These works are as individualized as the artists themselves—the common denominator being the intersection of language and art in each work. Featured in this section of the exhibition are artistic explorations of such diverse subjects as astronomy; color; current politics; domestic life; historical documents; letter writing, postcards, stamp designs, and mail art (with notable examples from Ray Johnson's New York Correspondance [sic] School); literary responses; memory; subtitled films; word play; time and nature's rhythms. There are also intriguing abstract "letter-scapes" created by gestural mark making, as in Alice Aycock's *The Garden of Scripts (Villandry)* of 1986 and Christine Hiebert's *L.99.1* of 1998-99. The rhythmic Arabic calligraphy in Annabel

Daou's *Constitution* (2004) exemplifies the numerous approaches to handwriting as an artistic language by several artists featured in this exhibition. Stephen Dean, Karen Schiff, and Molly Springfield have re-examined formal arrangements of texts in newspapers and magazines, or traditional books and early manuscripts, and then transformed their aesthetic responses in unexpected ways. Jane Hammond and Suzanne Bocanegra have each created individualized responses to the scrapbook or personal album tradition with their respective pictorial souvenirs.

Mark Lombardi is represented by two monumental drawings, which he executed in 1995: *Casino Resort Development in the Bahamas c. 1955-89 (Fourth Version)* and *Charles Keating-ACC-Lincoln Savings Irvine CA-Phoenix AZ ca. 1978-90 (fifth version)*. In a 1997 conversation with videographer Andy Mann, Lombardi described his style of drawing in this way: "I am pillaging the corporate vocabulary of diagrams and charts...rearranging information in a visual format that's interesting to me and mapping the political and social terrain in which I live."<sup>3</sup>

Circles and circular forms recur throughout the exhibition, inviting viewers to contemplate how often this shape occurs in nature, mathematics, and art. Jasper Johns formally re-examines the numeral zero in his numbers drawings of 1960 and in a rendition of the word *NO* from 1964. Lenore Tawney's collage *Fruitful Place* (1966) conjures a close-up of an eye peering out at the world. Joel Shapiro presents rows of his fingerprints (1969), using his own very specific identity marker to create an abstract grid, while Russell Crotty's *Hale Bopp Over Acid Canyon* (1999) is a circular composition that evokes the cosmos, in which the individual is merely an infinite speck. Perhaps most compelling are the concentric circles presented in Jill Baroff's *Untitled (Tide Drawing)* of 2006, which simul-

taneously addresses distinctive geometric form, water, rippling effects from a central point, and the daily cycles of tides.

We invite you to enjoy this extraordinary visual adventure, where artists combine words and imagery in ways that are simultaneously insightful and perplexing, playful and serious.

*Marilyn Symmes is the Morse Research Center for Graphic Arts Director and Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. In addition to overseeing the Zimmerli's installation of the Art=Text=Art exhibition in 2012, she organized the 2011-12 traveling exhibition Dancing with the Dark: Joan Snyder Prints 1963-2010. Other Zimmerli exhibitions she realized include: with the help of Rutgers University Art History graduate students, Pop Art and After: Prints and Popular Culture (2008); Jolán Gross-Bettelheim: An American Printmaker in an Age of Progress (2011); Aspects of Architecture: The Prints of John Taylor Arms (2012); Lynd Ward Draws Stories (2012); and Stars: Contemporary Prints by Derrière L'Étoile Studio, New York (2013). From the 1970s to 2002, Symmes held graphic arts curatorial posts at the Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts; Detroit Institute of Arts; the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio; and the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York, where she organized many old master to contemporary graphic arts exhibitions. In addition to the monograph Dancing with the Dark: Joan Snyder Prints 1963-2010 (2011), her publications include Impressions of New York, Prints from the New-York Historical Society (2005) and Fountains: Splash and Spectacle, Water and Design from the Renaissance to the Present (1998). Symmes has also published numerous catalogues and articles on prints, drawings, and artist illustrated books. Currently serving on the advisory board of the Lower East Side Printshop, New York, and the National Endowment for the Arts International Advisory Panel, Washington, DC, Symmes has previously served on the boards of the Print Council of America and the International Confederation of Architectural Museums. She has a BA in Art History from Stanford University, Stanford, California; and an MA in Art History and Museum Practice from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.*

<sup>3</sup> Mark Lombardi, quoted in Frances Richard, "Obsessive-Generous: Toward a Diagram of Mark Lombardi" in *Williamsburg Quarterly* (Winter 2001/2002), n.p.