

On View/*Art=Text=Art*

BY ANGELICA MAIER

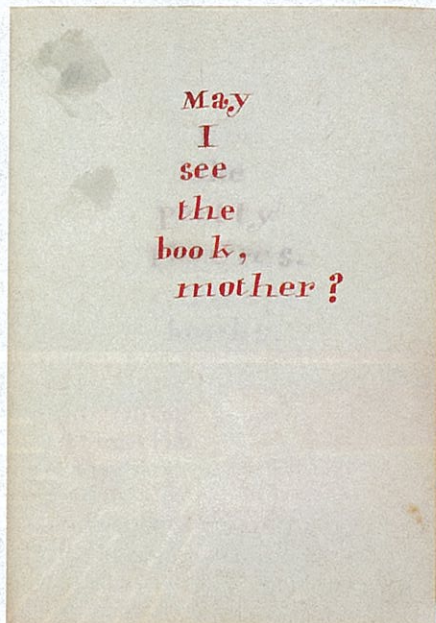
While artists have incorporated the written word and storytelling in art for centuries, the works featured in *Art=Text=Art* illustrate a previously undiscussed narrative—one created by a group of Cold War-era artists who spoke dissidently during a dangerous period. The exhibition illuminates the intersection of the personal and political in art and society, and, above all, recovers the role of queer post-war artists. *Art=Text=Art* opens this month at the University at Buffalo's Anderson Gallery.

Curated by Sarah JM Kolberg and Cat Dawson, both UB doctoral candidates, and Maddie Phinney, a recent MA graduate, the exhibition features rarely displayed works of concrete poetry from the University at Buffalo's Poetry Collection and works from the Anderson Collection, in addition to drawings, prints, and artists' books from the Sally and Wynn Kramarsky Collection. A conference will be held on

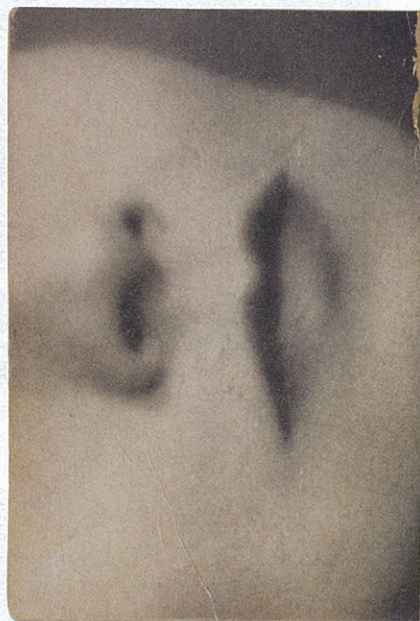
November 7 and 8 featuring scholars and artists included in the show. Jonathan D. Katz, associate professor and director of the UB Visual Studies doctoral program at UB, has overseen the work of the co-curators. (UB's show is actually an expanded version of an exhibition that has previously traveled to museums in Virginia, New Jersey, and Iceland.)

Phinney explains the co-curators' process: "We spent a year researching the use of text through the history of art, paying particular attention to the objects in this show, and came to find a foundational relationship between the use of text and politics. For queer artists interested in the politics of identity in the 1950s and early 1960s, text became a way to 'say without saying.' Irony, double entendre, and systems of numerals and letters were employed for their multiplicity of meanings, rather than as a tool of direct and singular address."

For example, one of the works in the



Caption: Detail from Ray Johnson, *BOO[K]*, ca. 1955, artist's book



show, *BOO[K]*, by Ray Johnson, serves as an example of a work with inherently multiple meanings. *BOO[K]* is constructed of translucent paper with red and black ink, and strategically placed cutaways. The translucent paper allows words on underlying pages to be read through the facing pages. This combination of translucence and cutaway words allows the viewer to "read" the page in whatever way she sees fit. She can ignore the translucent words poking through, or include them in her determination of meaning. In this way, Johnson allows the viewer to literally read between the lines.

Kolberg suggests that as a gay artist in 1955, Johnson had a direct investment in encouraging reading against the grain. In the midst of the Red scare (a witch-hunt for communist sympathizers) and Lavender scare (the policing of homosexuals, who were believed to be more susceptible to blackmail, and, thus, a threat to national security) in the 1950s, gay artists couldn't risk

speaking out publically without facing dire consequences. They could, however, through the use of text in art, create systems that question meaning, authority, and power. The ability for viewers to read between the lines (or ignore the lines altogether), created systems that succeeding generations of artists have adopted in their own use of text in their work.

Kolberg, Dawson, and Phinney assert that it is no coincidence that American artists Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly all use text in their art in similar ways, and are all gay. For the co-curators, the work of these gay artists has created a template that artists who were not necessarily gay could build upon. Dawson, in her catalog essay, demonstrates how artists such as Carl Andre,

Mel Bochner, and William Anastasi use and critique systems to question meaning. In her essay, Phinney discusses how the intersection of the personal and political is shown in the work of artists such as Ed Ruscha, Robert Indiana, Buster Cleveland, and Annabel Daou.

It's not every day in Buffalo that you have the opportunity to see such visually beautiful and emotionally evocative works together in one exhibition. And you don't need to know the difference between a Robert Rauschenberg and a Robert Indiana to take something from this show. After all, it is centered on the idea that the viewer—you—makes meaning.

Art=Text=Art opens September 20 and runs through January 11, 2015, at the University at Buffalo's Anderson Gallery.

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