ALMINE RECH

# WORDS WITHOUT THOUGHTS NEVER TO HEAVEN GO
# Curated by Dieter Buchhart

## Oct 31 — Dec 16, 2017 | New York, Upper East Side

*To write does not mean to convert the real into words but to make the power of the word real.*
Augusto Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*[1]

**Almine Rech Gallery New York is pleased to present *Words Without Thoughts Never to Heaven Go* featuring the word as an image and its metonymic relation to the motif itself. The title refers to, as Ed Ruscha put it: "a noble quotation that is as timeless as it is poetic,"[2] a line said by King Claudius in act three of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In a time where the word as a written unity - i.e. the meaning of the word and the displayed word - have become highly disparate due to digital and social media, the exhibition *Words Without Thoughts Never to Heaven Go* points towards the actuality of a thorough examination of the word in artworks. The exhibition follows the increasing importance of words in art, starting from Modernism and leading up through the twentieth century and into today.**

In 1916, the co-founder of Dada, Hugo Ball, asserted in his diary: "The word and the image are one. Painting and composing poetry belong together."[3] And yet, text is a foreign material taken from the realm of literature. The perception of an object is highly distinct from the perception of a text and both are processed in different ways by the brain. While we are able to conclude the meaning of objects, images, and symbols within just several nanoseconds due to the "picture superiority effect"[4], the brain has to go through a more complex process to assemble the sequence of letters as an image into a word and a context.[5] The dominant grasping of an image and object as a whole is contrasted to a "wandering viewpoint"[6] from letter to letter and from word to word, where the reader finds him or herself caught in a continuous process of grasping and translation. *Words Without Thoughts Never to Heaven Go* will be limited to the use of letters, numbers, words, and text as self-representative signs that stand in metonymic relation to the subject, object, or person "on a proposed contiguous or sequential link between the literal object and its replacement by association or reference, the substitution of one name for another."[7]

In the early sixteenth century, artists like Hans Holbein the Younger and Albrecht Dürer inserted writing as a visual element in their works, as a monogram or signature representing the artist himself or explaining who was depicted. In the same way, the depiction of fragments of reality with letters and decipherable texts can be found in the trompe l'œil painting of still-lifes from the seventeenth century in particular. But it was only with the start of the twentieth century that Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque's development of Cubism and later Dadaism and Surrealism opened art to overlapping with writing and language. The starting point of the exhibition is anchored in an astonishing group of rarely-seen early paintings and drawings by Picasso and Braque from their Cubist period, introducing words as pictorial elements in modern art, including the first purely textual work of cubism by Picasso: *Être ou ne pas être* from 1912.

Contrary to the Cubist emphasis on two-dimensional fragments of reality in a tactile visual space, the Italian Futurists opened with the “words-in-freedom” theory a free approach to the material of the text. The invention of noise-creating poetry in the sense of a visual use of text to represent tones and sounds served as the foundation of later Concrete Poetry. While the “words-in-freedom” idea also influenced the Dadaists, they radically rejected the Futurists’ enthusiasm for the war. It was under the influence of Dadaism, that Kurt Schwitters worked with trash as fragments of reality.

René Magritte's iconic work *La Trahison des Images (The Treachery of Images)*, with its statement “This is not a pipe,” is a key moment in art of questioning the pictorial representation of a subject. It opens up the overlap of art, writing, and language. While Magritte’s cursive writing imitates that of a sign painter, the handwriting of Cy Twombly directly expresses its physicality. The decoding process of the latter's writing, its force, clear direction, and the link to the body of the artist make it “inimitable.”[8]

After the Second World War, artists like Jasper Johns, Ed Ruscha, and Joseph Kosuth made words their main subjects and resources, as Ruscha explains: “I just happened to paint words like someone else flowers.”[9] The word "STEAK", in the eponymous work from 1962, thus represents a steak as well as the image of it. In this way, letters, numbers, words, and phrases became artistic motifs, objects, and part of artistic practice. In Johns' 1962 painting *Iron*, the artist melted away the encaustic paint with an iron and created the depiction and imprint of itself. The added word “iron” in cursive writing, referring both to the substance and the household appliance has a contiguous relationship to the imprint and to the iron itself.

With conceptual art from the 1960s, the word becomes virtually a necessary part of art, since the concept behind an artwork is given priority over its actual implementation, and the conceptual understanding of the beholder and his or her act of reading stands at the foreground. In Robert Morris’ *Location* from 1962/63 the mechanical counters represent the factual distance of the work from the walls, ceiling, and floor. In *Four Colors Four Words* by Joseph Kosuth, four words glow in four different colors of neon illuminating the complexity of the relationship between text and image. The neon writing refers to “The Play of the Unsayable”[10] of ambiguity and metonymy and displacement, like advertising in public space. Kosuth makes use of the inherent uniqueness of letters and words that can be randomly varied in their size without a loss of information. Similar to those of Bruce Nauman or Barbara Kruger, Kosuth's letters and words literally push into our subconscious.

In Pop Art, artists engaged with the artistic value of trivial, everyday objects like advertising, common place objects, and consumer goods. Andy Warhol's handmade imitations of the Brillo packaging lead up to the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Martin Kippenberger from the 1980s, that offer an outlook to the very broad use of words and language in contemporary art today. With a great self-evidence Basquiat took recourse to letters, words, numbers, lists, and phrases as artistic material in his works. They were an integral part of his work, with the artist using “words like brushstrokes.”[11]

Ruscha’s *Heaven* gives the final outlook on the art of recent decades: Wherever we look, text now seems equivalent in status to the image. "HEAVEN" is divided by a bamboo stick, a word that finds itself in a relationship of contiguity to the painted evening or morning sky in the background. This is not just a fitting representation of the ambiguity of Ruscha’s works, his methods of the unconscious, the fine irony, and the power and importance of words, when King Claudius admits his guilt in prayer: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: Words without thoughts never to heaven go.”[12] For “HEAVEN” is literally bound to the gaze toward the sky, the sky above us, the divine and being.

The exhibition is curated by Dr. Dieter Buchhart, who has organized major exhibitions by artists such as Edvard Munch, Georges Braque, Otto Dix, Ed Ruscha, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Keith Haring at institutions such as the Guggenheim Bilbao, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the De Young Museum in San Francisco, the Brooklyn Museum, the Albertina in Vienna, the Foundation Beyeler, and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The exhibition will be accompanied by a comprehensive catalog in English, which will feature illustrations of all exhibited works along with essays reflecting the latest research by the renowned experts Richard Shiff and Eric Robertson alongside Dieter Buchhart.

List of exhibited artists:
Jean-Michel BASQUIAT
Alighiero BOETTI
Georges BRAQUE
Francesco CLEMENTE
Joseph CORNELL
Juan GRIS
Jasper JOHNS
Martin KIPPENBERGER
Joseph KOSUTH
Barbara KRUGER
Sol LEWITT
René MAGRITTE
Robert MORRIS
Bruce NAUMAN
Pablo PICASSO
Larry RIVERS
Ed RUSCHA
Mario SCHIFANO
Kurt SCHWITTERS
Cy TWOMBLY
Ben VAUTIER
Andy WARHOL

[1] Augusto Roa Bastos, *I The Supreme*, translated by Helene Lane (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 59.
[2] Ruscha quoted in Mary Richards, *Ed Ruscha* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 90.
[3] Quoted in: Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 52.
[4] See Paul Miller, "The Processing of Pictures and Written Words: A Perceptual and Conceptual Perspective," *Psychology 2.7* (2011), 713–720; see also Lynn Hasher, Barbara Riebman, and Frances Wren, "Imagery and the Retention of Free-Recall Learning," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory 2.2* (1976), 172–181.
[5] See Lionel Standing, "Learning 10000 Pictures," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology 25.2* (1973), 207–222; William M. Gribbons, "Picture, Knowledge Acquisition, and Information Design," *IPCC 94 Proceedings: Scaling New Heights in Technical Communication*, IEEE, Alberta 1994, 251–256; Joyce M. Oates and Lynne M. Reder, "Memory for Pictures: Sometimes a Picture is not Worth a Single Word," *Successful Remembering and Successful Forgetting: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert A. Bjork*, ed. Aaron S. Benjamin (New York: Psychology Press, 2010). See also John Dixon Hunt, "Introduction," *Art, World and Image*, 15-16.
[6] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 108–9.
[7] Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 27.
[8] Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper", 170.
[9] Fred Fehlau, "Tantalizing Memory: Inside the Mind of Ed Ruscha", Flash Art (International Edition) 38, (March/April 2005), 85. Reprint, originally appeared in Flash Art International 138 (January-February 1988).
[10] Joseph Kosuth, Das Spiel des Unsagbaren/The Play of the Unsayable (Vienna: Secession, 1989; exhibition brochure).
[11] See also Klaus Kertess, "The Word," *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Notebooks*, ed. Larry Warsh (New York: Art + Knowledge, 1993), 17.
[12] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark, Act 3, Scene 3, The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare (London: Chancellor Press, 1982), 817.