



Review:
'Ecstatic
Alphabets' At
MoMA



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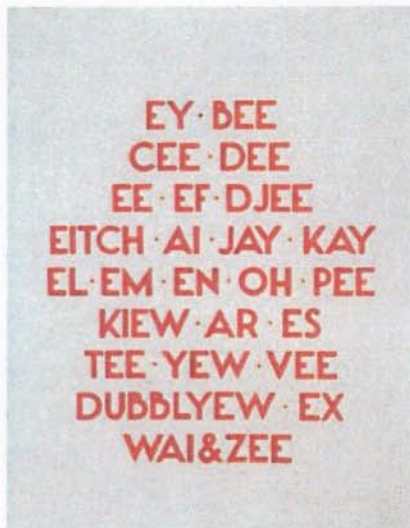
Alphabet Soup: MoMA Pulls out the Classics and the Young Guns of Language Art

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A home run for Hoptman



START THE SLIDESHOW

Language precedes us, the structuralist theorists said, and that goes for everyone, not just writers. Enter "Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language," an ambitious new group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that shows 44 artists from the past 100 years taking on letters, punctuation marks, chunks of written language and numbers too, and twisting, expanding and generally transforming them in all sorts of illuminating ways.

On Monday afternoon, Nora Schultz and Ei Arakawa stood next to a long, thin slab of stainless steel in a second-floor gallery at MoMA. A crowd of about 50 gathered around them to watch their performance piece. The two artists slipped on protective gloves and got to work, forcefully bending

the steel into numerals: first 10, which they presented to the crowd, then 9, and so forth. They struggled a bit with 4—folds and grooves had piled up in the tough, unwieldy steel—but they persevered and earned light applause with 2 and 1, and a hearty roar with 0. The piece, called *Countdown Performance (2007/2012)*, and organized by the museum's superb chief curator of media and performance art, Sabine Breitwieser, will be performed one more time, on May 2, at 4:30 p.m. Skip out of work and have a look. It's a delicious midday absurdity but also a tidy metaphor for how the artists in "Ecstatic Alphabets" make mischief with fixed sets.

The show is the work of curator Laura Hoptman, who is marking her return to MoMA, after about a decade at the Carnegie Museum of Art and the New Museum, in high style. (This show is a collaborative effort with curatorial assistant Eleonore Hugendubel; Ms. Hoptman's official debut was the midcareer retrospective of painter Henry Taylor at MoMA PS1, which closed in early April and was co-organized with PS1 curator Peter Eleey.) With "Alphabets" Ms. Hoptman has vanquished the often-awkward third-floor corridor that overlooks the museum's sculpture garden by stretching along it a sheet of plastic printed

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repeatedly with the words "WALK TALK" in big white capital letters, a work by the German artist Ferdinand Kriwet, who is too rarely exhibited in the U.S.

All along that plastic runway, Ms. Hoptman offers up an absorbing assortment of linguistics-tinged art-historical treats, beginning with a 1914/15 drawing of swirling letters by the futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Marcel Duchamp's pun-bedecked spinning discs from 1926. There is also a heartbreakingly spare 1930 *calligramme* by Apollinaire and de Chirico that spells out a poem about rain so that the text itself mimics a rain shower; Jasper Johns's 1960 lithograph *o THROUGH 9* features those numbers, deadpan and impersonal, sketched one on top of another; a seminal piece by the septuagenarian poet John Giorno consists in a bank of rotary phones—pick up the receiver and hear one of dozens of poems by different artists featured on his 1969 DIAL-A-POEM service. When *The Observer* gave it a whirl we got Frank O'Hara reading "Having a Coke with You," complete with a short introduction. (The poems are also available by calling 1-347-POET001 or visiting MoMA's website.)

Plenty of entries skew toward the ridiculous—so it goes when you play with letters and dismantle language. From the late Swiss artist Dieter Roth comes the 1962 piece *STUPIDOGRAMM*, 121 commas printed in a tiny grid, some of them enclosed in an awkwardly shaped heart. And a 2008 film by Rirkrit Tiravanija shows Mr. Giorno reciting five decades of his works in his studio. It clocks in at 10 hours, longer than the museum's normal visiting hours. Completists can visit on Friday.

WAR IS OVER! IF YOU WANT IT, a Christmas 1969 poster by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, shouts its message from midway down that hall. It is answered at the far end by an austere, pulsing red neon sign by Bruce Nauman that spells out, "RAW WAR," dated 1970. It's a clever piece of curating, one of those moments that would be gimmicky if it weren't poignant. This is the central section of the exhibition, the fulcrum if you will, where a full spread of 20th-century work gives way to more recent material. The Dutch collective Experimental Jetset offers up its 1997 version of that Lennon/Ono poster as "*ZANG TUMB TUMB (IF YOU WANT IT)*." So far, Ms. Hoptman has knocked it out of the park.

A small new Sharon Hayes letterpress, a typically ponderous text about protest, marks the way into the main event, a large gallery that features 12 young contemporary artists. This space is handsomely laid out—each of the artists has room to breathe. Which is to say there is also plenty of room for artists to fall flat. The quality varies.

Among the best is the rigorously conceptual painter and designer Tauba Auerbach, who is represented by a large swatch of pieces from 2005 and 2006. Her carefully rendered drawings depict Morse code and the phonetic spelling of the alphabet. One is comprised of what appears to be a long set of variations on that strange trumpet that plays so prominently in Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*. (Actually, it's the Ugaritic alphabet.) In another elegant little drawing, Ms. Auerbach has used a typewriter to punch out all 26 letters in a single spot and the result looks like a tiny smudge of ink. It's a modest but affecting update on Mr. Johns' overlaid numbers. These works are far more interesting than the oversize trompe l'oeil fabric paintings and oversize moiré spots she has offered up in recent years.

Even less successful than the Hayes in the context of this exhibition are the large paintings by Adam Pendleton—black monochromes overlaid with a few letters. They look like pages of icy 1970s conceptual art enlarged for no particular reason. In one corner of the show, however, Mr. Pendleton has created a huge collage in collaboration with Jaan Evart and Marc Hollenstein out of overlaid Mylar printed with texts and images that suggests he may have some interesting tricks up his sleeve.

The most thrilling contemporary entries are those in which the artists embody the first half of the exhibition's title (provided by a Shannon Ebner video), teasing ecstatic experience out of their limited materials. Take Mr. Arakawa and the fast-rising young German Nikoas Gambaroff, who have made 325 canvas flags out of spray paint, each bearing a two-letter monogram. They're scattered around the room—hung from ceilings and stacked in

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corners—and they show language running deliriously amuck. The same could be said of the text-covered wallpaper Karl Holmqvist has plastered in one corner. They contain jokes (or fragments of them, at least), shout outs to various artists and other miscellanea (think Michael Riedel with a sense of humor and only the most rudimentary graphic-design tools).

12 ALL

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