Building Blocks of Meaning, Retranslated

In a drawing from 1966, "Heaps of Language," Robert Smithson assembled a pyramid of words about words: "Language" at the apex, supported by "phraseology speech," "tongue lingo vernacular," and on down

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through a base of synonyms. The playful exhibi-ROSENBERG tion "Ecstatic Alphabets/ Heaps of Language," opening on Sunday at the Museum of Modern Art, borrows Smithson's title and runs wild

with his vision of words as materials. Organized by the MoMA painting and sculpture curator Laura Hoptman, with help from the curatorial assistant Eleonore Hugendubel, it assembles works by artists and artist's groups who make written and spoken communication intensely physical. Like-most shows at MoMA these days, "Ecstatic Alpha-

bets/Heaps of Language" comes with a It also has a print component, the work of the puckish publishing collaborative Dexter Sinister. Free online and

Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language Museum of Modern Art

series of performances.

\$5 in the MoMA shop, this volume mixes abstruse semiotics theory (an essay on the "meta-font") with personal and institutional history (an article published in The New York Times on the evolution of MoMA's logo).

The first half of the show has the same scrappy-intellectual voice. The half leading to the special exhibition galleries has been turned into a timeline of Dada wordplay and concrete poetry: spiraling puns by Duchamp, a phonetic poem by Schwitters, typewriter drawings by Henri Chopin and Christopher Knowles. A silkscreened PVC floor runner by Ferdinand Kriwet, from 1969, leads the way. Its bold white-on-black text issues two simple directives: "Walk Talk Walk Talk Walk Talk . . .

At the end of this corridor the poet John Giorno (filmed by the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija) is mostly talking; as he reads from his oeuvre, his body con vulses with each syllable. Other voices emanate from a reprise of Mr. Giorno's "Dial-a-Poem" of the late '60s, a set of black phones connected to recordings of poetry by the likes of John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg and Patti Smith. (Visitors can access the project from any phone by calling a local New York phone number - 347-763-8001.)

One could spend a long time here, listening to poets and staring at Bruce Nauman's hypnotic flashing neon piece "Raw War." But that's all prologue; the show begins, in earnest, with a short printed text by Sharon Hayes - one of four woven through the galleries and installed so close to the floor that you have to crouch down to read them. In these paragraphs Ms. Hayes puts herself forth as Virgil to the viewer's Dante, though she also assumes the roles of spurned lover, diarist and political agi-

"Today is May 1st," the first piece

"Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language" runs from Sunday through Aug. 27 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.



Dancers creating letters in a piece

reads. "It's been 71 days since we last spoke. I can imagine what you are thinking. This day of all days, this year of all years, this place of all places, there's no way in hell you'd be in a mu-

Just through the main gallery doors, a selection of Paul Elliman's "Found Fonts" - silver hoop earrings, bits of cardboard and other everyday objects shaped like letters and punctuation marks - occupies a large set of glass cases, bringing to mind the word bazaar in "The Phantom Tollbooth."

Also by Mr. Elliman is a diverting sound piece, made specifically for the show. Every 15 minutes, visitors hear one of several MoMA security guards intoning the names of places drawn from literature, pop culture or mythology. Fantastic locations like Brigadoon, Mount Olympus and Gotham City come to sound like stations on New Jersey Transit.

The landscapes in photographs by Shannon Ebner look real enough though she has graced them with big letters - darkly cryptic twists on the Hollywood sign. In her video "The Ecstaticalphabet" (like Smithson's drawing, a source for the show's title), letters composed of cinder blocks flash by one at a time. Watching it and piecing together its message, you become a hu-



man telegraph.

Elsewhere, the alphabet is spraypainted on cloth banners (by the team of Ei Arakawa and Nikolas Gambaroff), and printed on paper by means of a jury-rigged press of metal tubing and foam camping mats (by Nora Schultz).

The emphasis on labor is what separates this exhibition from other recent looks at text-based art. "Here language is built, not written," as Smithson wrote in a news release from 1967 (for a show called "Language to be Looked at and/ or Things to be Read.")

Numbers, too, have a place in "Ecstatic Alphabets." They appear in photographs from Ms. Schultz and Mr. Arakaby Paulina Olowska, above. Far left, a work by Ei Arakawa and Nikolas Gambaroff. Left, a PVC floor runner by Ferdinand Kriwet.

wa's "Countdown Performance," in

which the artists bent a thin piece of

stainless steel into the forms of num-

bers (descending from a nearly perfect "10" to a crinkly "0"). And their presence is implied in work by the painter and skilled mathematician Tauba Auerbach. Among her contributions is a group of rainbow-colored

books and paper cubes that turn out to be maps and spatial models of the visible spectrum. Synesthetes may rejoice: the rest of us can get a fleeting sense of what it's like to associate language and

As those works suggest, Ms. Hoptman could have taken the show in many different directions. At various times you feel that she is reining herself in, restricting her choices to a fairly narrow slice of the contemporary art world. The decision to include just 12 contemporary artists and artist's groups is questionable, though perhaps necessary to ensure that a heap of language doesn't turn into a Tower of Babel

The show ends as it begins, with a missive from Ms. Hayes:

"I'm sorry. I'm rusty. I feel disconnected. This is hard. We're out of touch. I'll start again."

Is it a "Dear John" letter? A manifesto? A prose poem? A message from beyond? Any, and all, seem possible.