

THE
WORD
IS
ART

The WORD is Art

MICHAEL PETRY

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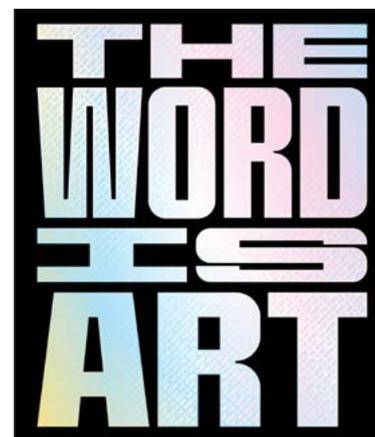
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A fascinating global overview of how contemporary artists incorporate text and language into work that speaks to some of the most pressing issues of the 21st century.

There has been much scaremongering about the 'death of the book' and how, as words find new ways and means of transmission, people might gradually begin to shun writing. In the digital age, text becomes information, and information strives to become free. But what value can text hold in the sphere of visual art? How is such text different to poetry? Can the poetic itself be visual art, or is text in this context consigned to the realms of gimmick and catchphrase?

Looking at the work of a broad range of artists including, Ghada Amer, Fiona Banner, Tania Bruguera, Chun Kwang Young, Martin Creed, eL Seed, Jenny Holzer, Roni Horn, Joseph Kosuth, Barbara Kruger, Christian Marclay, Annette Messager, Harland Miller, Raymond Pettibon, Laure Prouvost, Kay Rosen, Rachel Whiteread, Christopher Wool, Cerith Wyn Evans, Zhang Huan and many more, *The WORD is Art* examines each of these questions, contending above all that in the digital and online age, words have become more important than ever. With the advent of texting and social media, many predicted the debasement of language, and some have pointed to evidence of this in our 'post-truth' culture. Michael Petry demonstrates that, on the contrary, words remain critical, powerful and central to art practice.

Digital communication has seen the word as text permeate life in ways that the poets and artists of yesterday could never have imagined. Presenting a brief history of word- and book-based art, and examining major areas where the word has dominated artistic practice – **Installed Words, Three-Dimensional Words, Light, New Media, The Conceptual Word, Social Comment, The Drawn Word, Books** – *The WORD is Art* takes us on a fascinating and richly illustrated global tour of diverse contemporary art forms.

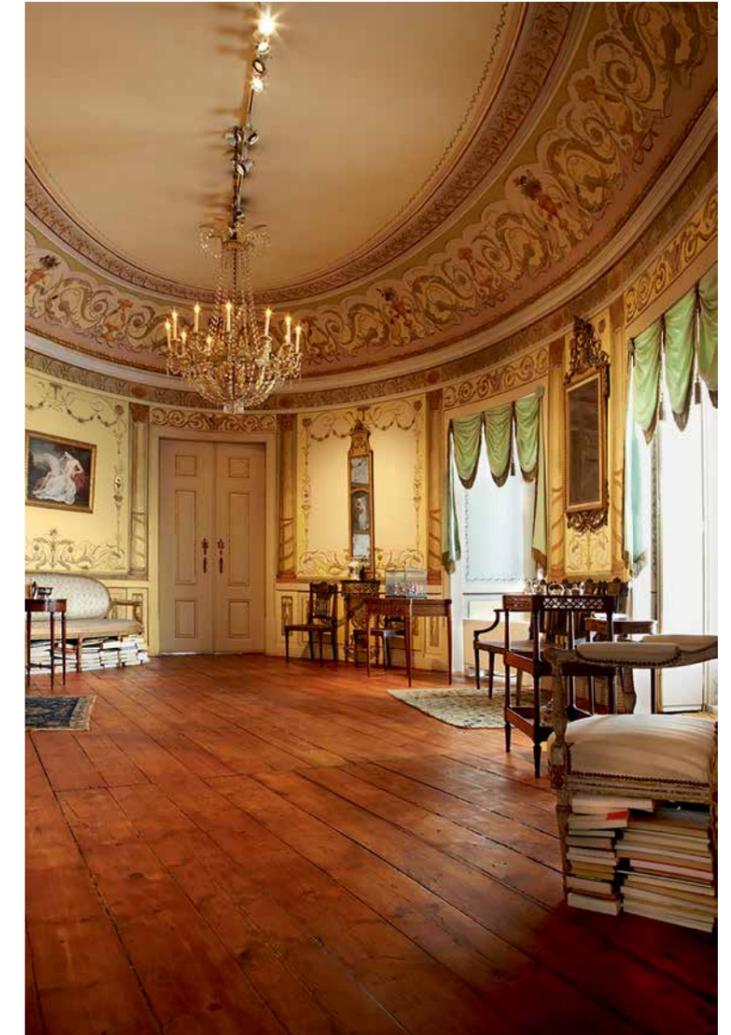
Michael Petry is an artist, author and Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), London. The *Trouble with Michael*, a monograph of his practice, was published in 2001, and his 2012 one-man show, 'The Touch of the Oracle' at the Palm Springs Art Museum, was accompanied by a ten-year career retrospective publication. Petry was the first artist-in-residence at Sir John Soane's Museum. He has written a number of books, including *Installation Art*, *The Art of Not Making: the new artist / artisan relationship*, and *Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists Reinvent the Still-Life Tradition*, all published by Thames & Hudson.



The Portuguese artist Sofia Leitão has made a series of sculptural works consisting of stacks of books with golden springs spewing from them (above). The books date from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries (the older books placed at the bottom), creating a timeline that may be associated with a cultural geology. Leitão explains that 'obsolete information, once representative of a bygone world, is lost through crystallizing or liquefying as a gold torrent', in much the same way that oil is generated within rock structures. Natural and artificial phenomenon are hinted at in the works, which allude to the wealth of knowledge potentially lost or yet to be rediscovered.

In 2010 Ana Fonseca, a Portuguese artist, created the site-specific installation *Jardim perfumado* (Perfumed Garden; opposite) at the Museu de Artes Decorativas, Fundação Ricardo do Espírito Santo Silva in Lisbon. In one of the grand drawing rooms she placed piles of books under an antique cream sofa and a similar chair. If they looked closely, viewers could make out the titles of some of the books, including *Jardim perfumado*, written sometime between the 12th and 15th centuries, and attributed to Muhammad al-Nafzawi. The Arabic text describes sexual positions, manners, techniques and pleasures. Other books that stood out from their storage place included *The Kama Sutra*, the famous ancient Sanskrit treatise on the art of

sexual technique; *The Art of Love* by Ovid; an anthology of erotic poetry; works by the Marquis de Sade; and contemporary erotic novels. 'Whatever Lola Wants', sung by Sarah Vaughan, played softly in the background. Fonseca continually had to restack and tidy the piles, as – although the books were not meant to be touched – visitors and guard staff kept removing them to read and then misplaced them. Visitors were also not allowed to sit on the furniture.



OPPOSITE • Sofia Leitão
Matéria do esquecimento (Forgetfulness Matter), 2011 • Books, sequins, steel pins, foam, wire and black leatherette
256 × 190 × 130 cm
(100¾ × 74¾ × 51¼ in.)

ABOVE AND LEFT • Ana Fonseca
Jardim perfumado (Perfumed Garden), 2010 • Second-hand and erotic books, and sound; site-specific installation at the Museu de Artes Decorativas, Fundação Ricardo do Espírito Santo Silva, Lisbon • Dimensions variable

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Michael Petry

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