

Kerning

An expanded notion of 'kerning'

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Concrete poetry sought to remind us that the written word is a visual phenomenon, that the size and shape of letterforms can be as significant as the words themselves. It also sought to explore how the space of the page, including the space between letters and words, can be used to articulate meaning. The text-based artists in this show share similar concerns. Hence the appropriateness of the title, *Kerning*, which is the typographic process of adjusting the space between letters, but I would also argue that the artists in this show are looking to expand upon the idea of kerning, to include the articulation of both the materiality and the spatiality of language itself. In other words, as I read them, each of these artworks intends to explore the substance of their letterforms, as well as the gallery space around them, particularly the space between the artwork and the viewer, in order to suggest a more expansive idea of kerning.

Some of the artworks in this show are also clearly influenced by the tradition of conceptual art, a tradition which made it possible for words to *be* art, as opposed to simply being *in* art, but it would be more fitting, in regards to this show, to speak of what text-based art tends to do more generally, which, I would argue, is to explore the tension that exists between the act of looking and the act of reading. That is, the tension that exists between visually scanning an image and the act of looking through, or into, written symbols for their linguistic meaning. If you think about what happens when we read a page of text, it is as if we see through the words, in order to ascertain their meaning. It is as if with reading the letters themselves are rendered invisible. This can lead us to think of language as transparent, or of words as something ideal, or immaterial, and this can sometimes lead us toward dangerous ideological consequences. In this regard, it is a common goal of text-based art, as it was for concrete poetry, to remind us that writing is a *visual* language, and that, no matter how otherworldly or transparent it can be, in the deliverance of its meaning, it is always materialised in some specific form. Text-based art also tends to remind us that the origins of writing were in pictographs and ideograms. That is, that from the beginning, writing was a visual form of communication. The alphabet came much later in the evolution of writing. And the conceptual separation of art and literature, or of image-making and the written text, is an even more recent cultural phenomenon, one that was probably a consequence of the proliferation of books after the invention of moveable type and the printing press.

Today, we live in a world that has become so saturated by digital information that some have proclaimed the end of the book or have spoken of us as living in a 'post-literate' culture. Others have suggested, given our supposedly shorter attention spans, that concrete poetry might be particularly suited to this time, that a poetry made to be scanned by the eye is particularly suited to a people who spend their time scrolling through the visual cacophonies of social media, and it is certainly true that a lot of concrete poetry, as well as a lot of text-based art, consists in little more than a visual pun, or a conceptual one-liner, thus rendering it easily consumable, but

the curators of this show strongly oppose this idea. For them, text-based art ought to slow down the ways in which we consume, create, or engage with language. They would argue that it ought to teach us to be more attentive to the wonders and the weirdness of language.

As the typographic process of adjusting the space between letters, kerning is also said to be the process of making text ‘look right’, which could be interpreted to mean the process of making text more easily consumable. This is testified by the fact that the word ‘kerning’ is often used to refer to poor kerning. That is, we only tend to notice the kerning of a text when something seems to be wrong with the typesetting, which is also to say that kerning, as a typographic process, probably correlates with a tendency to think of language as ideally transparent. We might also relate this to the tendency, in our information economy, to privilege efficiency, or the desire to increase the speed and volume of data delivery, and, therefore, with the social processes of mastery, conformity, and control. The artists in this show, on the other hand, aim to slow down the act of reading, and to teach us to pay attention to the material and spatial contexts in which we create language. In doing so, they reveal a desire for language to be iconic, sensuous, and mysterious. Moreover, in bearing witness to the spaces we create between letters and words, they also provide us with an opportunity to both ‘read’ and ‘see’ the material processes at work in the production of language. So, these artists are not simply interested in wordplay, or the transposition of text into a gallery space, but the philosophical and political implications inherent to the visual, spatial, and material aspects of linguistic production.

These works also seek to introduce a deeper ‘looking’ into the act of reading and a deeper ‘reading’ into the act of looking, and thus to break down the categorical division between art and literature. As I mentioned above, after the invention of the printing press, verbal language came to be regarded as conceptually distinct from the category of the visual. This separation was also driven by the Enlightenment idea that concepts are higher, or more valuable, than sensual realities. For while verbal language is understandably associated with conceptual apprehension, the reception of an image by the eye might be regarded, in comparison, as purely receptive, and thus merely sensual. Over the course of the twentieth century, as more and more art came to include letters and words, these conceptual hierarchies have come to be challenged more and more by various forms of text-based art. This exhibition can also be read as a continuation of this trend. For each of these artworks, as I read them, hopes to reveal a hidden sensuality in the written sign, and a conceptual or cognitive aspect intrinsic to all mark-making. In other words, this is an exhibition in thrall to the productive possibilities of language as a visual phenomenon.

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