

**S.** In the 12th century, Hildegard van Bingen (1098 – 1179), created a secret language, which was apparently used for mystical purposes. In the meantime this language has become regarded as one of the first ever 'constructed' languages. It consists of the *Lingua Ignota*, a list of over 1000 words, with no known grammar, and a set of 23 alternative shapes for the 23 letters used in the Latin language, called *Litterae Ignotae*. For *L'écriture avant la lettre*, Edgar Walthert designed one of the first contemporary sans-serif versions of *Litterae Ignotae*, as an extension of his sans serif font Logical.

**T.** *Public Access Poetry* was a TV program in 1977 and 1978 featuring half-hour readings by a wide range of 'downtown' poets and performers' more often than not linked in one way or another with the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in New York. In December 1977, in this video, Hannah Adelle Weiner (1928 – 1997), reads from *The Clairvoyant Journal* together with Sharron Mattlin and Peggy De Coursey recounting Weiner's daily life in the three voices her typewriter could legibly distinguish (see publication on display).

**U.** *Her Production* is a short video by Nicoline van Harskamp from 2014, consisting of an audio track alongside a projection of subtitles in International Phonetic Alphabet (or IPA): an alphabetic system of phonetic notation, which was devised by the International Phonetic Association in the late 19th century as a standardized representation of speech sounds in written form. The system is largely attributed to phonetician Daniel Jones – after whom Bernard Shaw famously modeled the character of Henry Higgins in his play "Pygmalion". Jones initiated a yearly Summer Course of English Phonetics that still brings large groups of scholars from all over the world to the UCL in London. In 2014 Nicoline van Harskamp, who taught herself IPA and aspired to one day write it at verbatim speed like Henry Higgins, attended the course and conducted an experiment among her fellow students and her teachers. She played them an audio clip with her own voice and asked them to comment on her English or, in linguistic terms, her production. The various critiques are collaged into an audio track, and subtitled using the

symbols of the IPA, thus exposing the 'imperfections' in the production of the respondents themselves.

**V.** Over more than eight years, Brigitte Willberg (1921 – 2020) designed figure images from historical type elements and also set them herself. Through the more than seventy individual works using only six basic figures, the interplay of the visible forms and the invisible spaces in between then can be observed.

**W.** *What does 'Why' mean?* is a hilarious and profound investigative-publication by Octavian Esanu. It was published in 2001, while Esanu was residing at Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. For *What Does 'Why' mean?*, Esanu read hundreds of interviews and essays by artists and art critics, which he used to form a new text out of questions about art, culled from the readings. Each question is carefully footnoted.

**X.** Shigeru Matsui writes what he calls *Pure Poems*: short poems consisting out of the numbers one, two and three, and typeset with Roman numbers, using only the letter I. Matsui started writing *Pure Poems* in early 2001 and has meanwhile published over 1400. They are based on the 20 x 20 grid of standard Japanese writing paper and consist of four hundred numbers.

**Y.** In 1949 John Cage (1912 – 1992) gave his *Lecture on Nothing* at the Artists' Club on Eighth Street in New York City (the artists' club started by Robert Motberwell, which predated the popular one associated with Philip Pavia, Bill de Kooning, et al.). *Lecture on Nothing* was written in the same rhythmic structure Cage employed in his musical compositions of that period. One of the structural distinctions was the repetition, some fourteen times, of a single page on which occurred the refrain, 'If anyone is sleepy let him go to sleep.' Jeanne Reynal, who attended the lecture, stood up part way through, screamed, and then said, while Cage continued speaking, 'John, I dearly love you, but I can't bear another minute.' She then walked out. Later, during the question period, Cage gave one of six previously prepared answers regardless of the question asked. *Lecture on Nothing* was a reflection of his engagement in Zen.

**Z.** Born in 1950 in Taiwan, Tehching Hsieh emigrated to the USA when he was 24. Between 1978 and 1986, as an illegal immigrant, he completed five one-year-long performances. One of these was the 1978 – 1979 *Cage Piece*, in which he locked himself into a wooden cell of 3.5 x 2.7 x 2.4 metres that contained only a washstand, a lamp, a bucket, and a bed, for a whole year. During that year he did not permit himself to talk, read, write, watch TV, or listen to the radio. The entire process was documented by a public notary who also testified that the artist did not leave the cell. A roommate of his prepared Hsieh's meals and took out the waste. Once or twice a month the action was open to the public. Looking back, one interesting thing about this action is that it took place before this type of happenings were automatically public events via the Internet and social media. Although no exact record exists of how many people actually visited Hsieh at his cell in his own apartment we may assume that the *Cage Piece*, just like Duchamp's *Fountain*, has become known mainly through documentation and archiving.

**.** Goran Đorđević is a former artist from Yugoslavia. He graduated in electrical engineering in Belgrade and visual studies at MIT. Since 1985 he has not been active as an artist, except for a brief period (1988-91) as a member of the *Amateur Art Society Jedinstvo* in Belgrade under the pseudonym Adrian Kovacs. From 1992 – 2014, he was a doorman of the *Salon de Fleurus*, New York, a live reenactment of Gertrude Stein's Paris salon from the early 20th century, housing copies of her collection of modern art. Đorđević also collaborated on the project *International Exhibition of Modern Art* that was part of the official selection of Serbia and Montenegro on the Venice Biennale in 2003. Since the opening of the *Museum of American Art in Berlin* (2004), he has become its technical assistant responsible for external activities.

# L'ÉCRITURE AVANT LA LETTRE

With works by

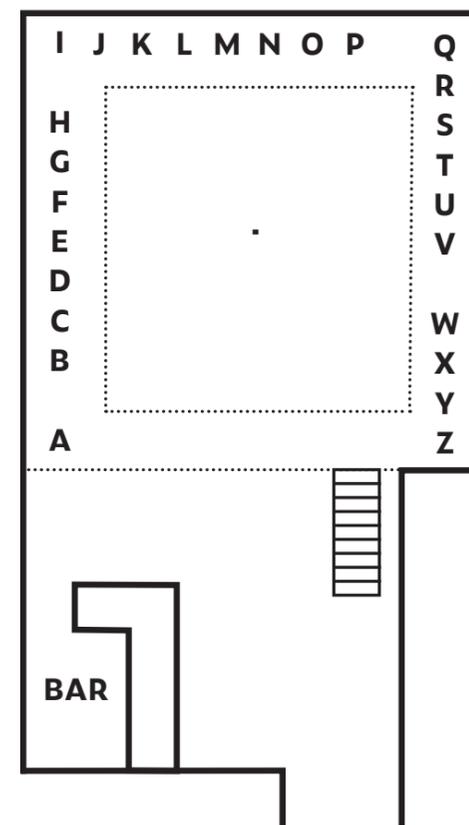
- |                                |                               |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| A <b>David Antin</b>           | N <b>Hedwig Houben</b>        |
| G <b>Walter Benjamin</b>       | F <b>Emily Kocken</b>         |
| O <b>Joseph Beuys</b>          | I <b>James Langdon</b>        |
| S <b>Hildegard van Bingen</b>  | K <b>Jude Lombardi</b>        |
| Y <b>John Cage</b>             | B <b>Günter Gerhard Lange</b> |
| . <b>Goran Đorđević</b>        | P <b>Stephane Mallarmé</b>    |
| I <b>Uta Eisenreich</b>        | X <b>Shigeru Matsui</b>       |
| W <b>Octavian Esanu</b>        | Q <b>Tine Melzer</b>          |
| . <b>Res Feber</b>             | E <b>Yoko Ono</b>             |
| M <b>Ryan Gander</b>           | K <b>Annetta Pedretti</b>     |
| J <b>Kenneth Goldsmith</b>     | L <b>The Rodina</b>           |
| C <b>Gary Hill</b>             | T <b>Hannah Weiner</b>        |
| D <b>Victorie Hanna</b>        | S <b>Edgar Walthert</b>       |
| U <b>Nicoline van Harskamp</b> | V <b>Brigitte Willberg</b>    |
| H <b>Toine Horvers</b>         | R <b>Unica Zürn</b>           |
| Z <b>Tehching Hsieh</b>        |                               |

In the 11th century, the German writer, composer and mystic Hildegard van Bingen (1098 – 1179), created the *Lingua Ignota* (unknown language), consisting out of a 1000 word strong vocabulary, which is meanwhile regarded as the first personal constructed language ever. It also included its own writing system, the *Litterae Ignotae*.

800 years later, the French symbolist poet Stephane Mallarmé (1842 — 1898), created his immensely complex lifework *Le Livre*. A collection of over 200 pages of notes, about a book, supposed to be distributed as loose sheets and which had to be performed in public. Twice.

80 years later, the American poet, critic and performance artist David Antin (1932 — 2016), started to perform extemporaneously, improvised performances at readings and exhibitions, which he called 'talk poems'. Meanwhile, those talk poems are regarded as one of the most crucial contributions, to a new artistic genre known as 'Performance Lectures': public performances, where different media and representations are deployed, to create an engaging narrative.

With the exhibition *L'écriture avant la lettre*, the Alphabetum wants to investigate the underlying structure of language. What is written and spoken language truly referring to? Is it really pointing towards pure ideas, as explained by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure? Or is there a deeper invisible structure of traces, as outlined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his infamous book *De la grammatologie*.



**A.** *The Noise of Time* is a 'talk poem' by David Antin (1932 – 2016), a hybrid of criticism, poetry, and storytelling that involves Antin discoursing freely in front of an audience. *The Noise of Time* was performed by Antin during his residency at the University of Colorado in 1994, and 11 years later published in a slightly modified form as *i never knew what time it was*, which is also on display. The spoken quality of the text is conveyed by the total lack of punctuation in the book.

**B.** *Die Inszenierung Einer Botschaft In Der Fläche* (Staging a message in Two Dimensions) is a live recording of a lecture by Günter Gerard Lange (1921 – 2008), given at 11pm on the 5h of October 1996 as part of the internationale Design conference *Typo Berlin* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Also known as 'Gutenberg's machine gun', Lange made himself a reputation for being one of the most eloquent type-design-story-tellers ever: something which could be regarded as a contradiction in terms, because it combines two diametrically opposed aspects of language in one word; the written and the spoken. Besides it being impossible to communicate the form of a letter precisely in spoken language, Lange's concern extended even further: namely the sensitization for all language matter.

**C.** In 2019, in close cooperation with Gary Hill, Juxta Press Milan, published the artist-book *Inasmuch as It Has Already Taken Place*. This publication consists of a record and two books. For the record, Hill and his sound technician composed a piece of music primarily based on high-pitch tones interrupted with silence. The composition was digitally mastered in such a way, that when the track is pressed on a LP record, the grooves of the record magically align in such a way, that text appears on both sides. One side is reading 'Inasmuch as It Is Always Already taking Place', the other side 'Inasmuch as It Is Always taking Place'. The accompanying booklets document the exchanges of Hill with vinyl record makers and the technician/engineer who wrote the program to compose the music. Another part consists of chapters with headings that are 'last words'. Two of them are the sentences which appear on the record.

**D.** Victoria Hanna grew up as the daughter of a rabbi whose house was full of books cultivating an early awareness that Hebrew letters were more than just shapes on a page. 'When you look at the letters [...] you drink the letters in your eyes. In the Jewish tradition, the letters are not separated from meaning, and the meaning is not separated from the physical existence and from the sound.' In the song *Aleph-bet*, published on youtube in 2015, Hanna created a video single about the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and their various vowel sounds. Hanna also developed for this video a special choreography according to Kabbalistic teachings that connect each letter with a different part of the human body.

**E.** *Grapefruit*, a book of Instructions and Drawing, was firstly published by Yoko Ono (under the name Wunternbaum Press, Tokyo) in an edition of 500 in 1964. The book consists of series of instruction pieces, where the reader is asked to take action. The first and one of the most provocative one is printed right at the beginning, on the inside of the dust cover. It is saying: 'Burn this book after you read it.' During the years the book was republished several times, by various publishers world wide, legally and not so legally. Amongst them, a Leiden Commune in 1971, to pay for food (they figure Yoko Ono and John Lennon have enough money already), which included additional work by Ono on the last few pages. In 2013, 49 years after the initial publishing of *Grapefruit*, a follow up, *Acorn*, was released.

**F.** In 2015 Emily Kocken presented *Come-Go-Stay*, a discursive installation at West The Hague. Inspired by Gertrude Stein's work and life, Kocken trained a poodle, resembling the one Stein used to own, and took the poem *Sacred Emily* as a literal instruction, adopting the name Emily as a sought-after readymade. During the presentation phase, West co-hosted an event where the audience was invited to celebrate the famous sentence from this poem 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose', by reading the poem in silence, only using their voice when encountering these words. The reading transformed into an intimate choir moment, or gathering, silence was a lively felt anticipation of these expected words.

**G.** In 1986 – many years after his tragic death – Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) re-appeared again in public with the lecture *Mondrian 63 – 96* organised by the Marxist Center in Ljubljana. At the same time, Mr. Benjamin became an associate of the *Museum of American Art* in Berlin, giving interviews and publishing articles on art, originality, museums, art history, etc. After a long pause he appeared again in public in 2011 with the lecture *The Unmaking of Art*, first at the Times Museum in Guangzhou and then at the Arnolfini in Bristol. The same lecture was repeated in 2012 at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporaneo in Mexico City, Tranzit in Budapest, Institutions by artists in Vancouver and most recently at Le Plateau in Paris (2013).

**H.** Toine Horvers about *Writing Lecture*: 'Christoph Daviet, editor of artists books in Paris, invited me to make a publication based on handwriting. I wrote a text in which I give a detailed description of the act of handwriting: what happens exactly when writing with a fountain pen, how does the writing develop on the sheet, what sounds arise from the movements of the pen, and so on. It resulted in 7 A4 sheets. I wrote and at the same time pronounced the text live for an audience in the gallery in Paris. The sheets were scanned and printed later and brought together in a folder in an edition of 75 copies.'

**I.** *Play*, a publication by Uta Eisenreich and James Langdon was published in the context of a series of performances and exhibitions. The exhibitions included *Things on a Table* by Uta Eisenreich and Eva Meyer-Keller with Katrin Hahner at Pact Zollverein, in Essen, and *A Play* by Eisenreich with Meyer-Keller and James Langdon, shown at Ellen de Bruijne Projects in Amsterdam. The departure point was Gertrude Stein's modernist text, *Objects Lie on a Table* (1922). The exhibition took form as a mural conceived with graphic designer James Langdon. Unlike the experience of the stage piece, where elements appear in a timeline, the book provides an abundance of elements – signs, colours, fragments, and texts – for the reader to assemble and construct meaning with.

**J.** On April 3rd in 2017, Kenneth Goldsmith presented *The Ideal Lecture (in memory of David Antin)* at FIAC Paris: a 'mixed reality' performance, where Goldsmith develops the interplay of his performance and what he is presenting on screen. While obviously reflecting on David Antin's work – and especially his 'talk poems' – *the Ideal Lecture* focuses on the difference between the spoken and the written. Why are punctuation like exclamation mark, comma or period not pronounceable, and why do they immediately appear like police agents, once you are wondering what they are actually doing between all the letters?

**K.** *memories of the next revolution – an autopoiesy* by Annetta Pedretti (1957 – 2018) is a small publication, published by Pedretti own's publishing House, Prinzelet Editions, in London 1990. The small size was chosen deliberately, so that they booklet could easily be taken anywhere. 9 years earlier, Pedretti published in 1981 her doctoral thesis on The cybernetics of language. A theory that is developed in terms of the requirements for an observer to construct, communicate and make an argument. A language is constructed for the description of these processes in two complementarity ways: between description and interpretation and between saying and doing. On display is also the documentary *Turning Objects into Rythm* by Jude Lombardi, about Annetta Pedretti.

**L.** The Rodina about *Action to Surface*: 'We, designers, are used to presenting graphic design as a surface centric practice, the way of surface production. In addition to this, Tereza tries to step out of separate media constraints to establish a new field of potential through identifying performative components in graphic design processes and products. This research establishes links between action, body, designer and surface. It attempts to convince the reader, that surface production could be an action, happening, or chance driven act. Therefore the text introduces necessary theoretical, philosophical and historical backgrounds of performance art.'

**M.** *Loose associations* by Ryan Gander is a touring lecture first devised in 2001 (during Ganders residency at the Rijksacademie Amsterdam), and

continuously adapted and added to ever since. It is presenting and connecting anecdotes on often-overlooked or hidden aspects of art, design, language and the structure of society. Subjects range from 'desire lines' to the NatWest logo; from Ryan's Aunt Deva to Homer Simpson; from The Knowledge of London's cab drivers to Star Trek's Klingon language. Over the years, the lecture has been presented at various occasions worldwide. The publication on display gives an overview of the various versions of the lecture.

**N.** *In Five Possible Lectures on Six Possibilities for a Sculpture* by Hedwig Houben, presented here as a video and script (see book), a sculpture takes the floor and wants to speak about the collaboration with Hedwig, as she calls Houben. The sculpture turns out not to be entirely satisfied. Her status is in question because Hedwig has a habit of making derivative variations of the sculpture and constantly giving them a lot of attention. 'And what about me', says the sculpture in despair: 'Who was I, Who am I, Who shall I be?' The sculpture wants to take a close look at itself and its maker via the various lectures Hedwig has given previously.

**O.** On the 19th of April in 1980, Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986) had a public conversation with Peter Stycken at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen. During the conversation, when not being able to explain his ideas though pure language, Beuys stood from the table, to draw his thoughts on a black board which was prepared for this occasion. In addition to the video, there are three publications on display: the original accompanying newspaper, published by the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen from 1980; the first transcription of the lecture, also published by the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen; and the extended re-publication by Fucking Good Art from 2008, which additionally includes the questions from the audience.

**P.** *Le Livre* by Stephane Mallarmé (1842 – 1898) could be simply described as the ideal book, which was never meant to be published. The immensely complex lifework, consists out of over 200 pages of notes and diagrams, about the production, distribution, and creation of a book. But in

addition to those private self-referential dimensions, Mallarmé also added a public dimension to this project: the content of *Le Livre* was not supposed to be published as a book, but to be performed in public. In that way, we also have to take Mallarmé's proposition 'Everything in the world exists in order to end up in a book.' carefully. Namely: at the end, every books exists in order to be read. Loud or in silence.

*Le Livre* was firstly published in 1957, 58 years after Mallarmé's death. This edition, edited by Jaques Scherer, contains typo transcripts of the entire project, and two facsimiles of the original notes. Another 59 years later, in 2018, a English version, translated by Sylvia Gorelick followed.

**Q.** *Taxidermy for Language-Animals. A Book on stuffed words*, by Tine Melzer, was firstly published in 2016 and is about the non-meeting between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gertrude Stein. They might have met in England, but missed each other. This non-meeting leads to various observations, described, discussed and reflected on in the book. For example, a parrot can be trained to repeat the sounds we make when we speak, but what does it say? In Taxidermy for Language-Animals Melzer examines language fragments from different practices – philosophy, literature, visual art – by exploiting some of our linguistic habits and tools, including examples of ordinary language trapped in images, games we play with language and games language plays with us.

**R.** In her autobiographical novel *The Man of Jasmine*, Unica Zürn (1916 – 1970) gives two definitions of anagrammatic construction:

1. Anagrams are words and phrases which arise by rearranging the letters of a word. Only the given letters are usable and no others may be called on.

2. The law of the anagram is: All the letters the initial sentence contains have to be used in its anagram.

In that way, an anagram is both a game and a law. This emphasizes the inner logic of any language. How can we communicate if there are no laws? Why would we want to communicate if there is no space to play? On display are shown a sketch of the poem *Der Geist aus der Flasche* which offers a glimpse into Zürn's pre digital work-process.