
This collection of eighteen essays, edited by Marija Dalbello (associate professor of Library and Information Science, Rutgers University) and Mary Shaw (professor of French, Rutgers University) has an ambitious aim: to find connections between current research across the different fields studying written language as a graphic (i.e. visual) sign and its interaction with images, not just in art and literature, but also in everyday contexts. Based on presentations at the interdisciplinary conference of the same title organized in 2006 by Rutgers and Université de Paris 8–St. Denis, the contributions span literary studies, art history, design, visual communication, book arts, history of writing, and philosophy of language.

Such an inclusive approach, reflecting the hybrid nature of the subject, results in a book that offers something for everyone. Subjects discussed in the essays include pre-Colombian Mesoamerican scripts, inscriptions on Greek vases and miniatures, medieval illuminated books, Renaissance printing, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Paul et Virginie, literary manuscripts, Un coup de dés and La prose du Transibérien, anthropomorphic almanacs in the Habsburg Empire, French fin de siècle posters, comics, language in modern and contemporary art, color in contemporary poetry, Chinese ideograms, the writings of Henri Michaux, text-based decoration on Alhambra’s walls, “catastrophe writings,” and the visibility of writing in contemporary media. Illustrations of Buzz Spector’s altered books and collages provide a running visual comment throughout the book.

The essays are generally well-written, and all are well-researched, in many cases representing the cutting edge within their fields. The collection is historical in range and multicultural in character, with a strong French element in terms of contributors (several essays appear in translation) and subject matter. The emphasis, however, is on Western modern and contemporary forms, with the different aesthetic modes of combining words and images sharing the materiality of writing, and the practice of writing as a visual art. In a field where multiple disciplines and terminology coexist, often obscuring rather than clarifying the subject, no single theory is being proposed, and the editors have succeeded in their aim not to wrap it up but to open it further.

This title is rather unique in range and ambition, building on previous work on different disciplines. Although certain knowledge of their fields of study is often assumed by the authors, most contributions can be read with benefit by non-experts. Well-illustrated and well-produced, it includes notes, brief contributor biographies and an extensive index. It is recommended for academic libraries supporting programs in visual culture, art, literature, linguistics, and French studies, particularly at postgraduate level.

Gustavo Grandal Montero, Collection Development Librarian, Chelsea College of Art & Design Library, University of the Arts London, g.grandal-montero@chelsea.arts.ac.uk