

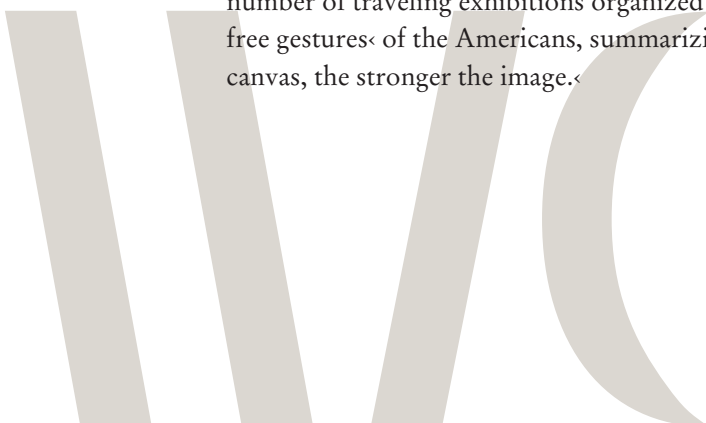
THOMAS KELLEIN: WRITTEN ART COLLECTION. ART AS SCRIPT AND IMAGE

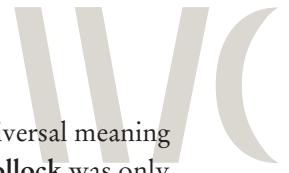
For a long time in historic civilizations – in the ancient Egyptian and Babylonian as well as the Chinese and Japanese cultures – calligraphy existed on an equal footing with drawing and painting, often appearing alongside or within the pictorial material. In the Islamic world, letters and ornamental signs played a defining role in visual art for centuries. In European works of art, writing and imagery are comparatively separate until the end of the 19th century, with the exception of initials in medieval manuscripts or, at the beginning of modernism, in Stéphane Mallarmé's famous poem of 1897, ›Un Coup de dés‹ (A roll of the dice).

Two Western artists who dealt with the subject of ›writing as image‹ by studying Asian calligraphy were **Mark Tobey** and **André Masson**. Tobey's contact with Far Eastern art began with a trip to China in 1934; later he learned calligraphy in Japan. **Masson** was a dévoté of Chinese calligraphy and also steeped himself in the study of Japanese calligraphy. Many other painters and draftsmen after 1945 in Europe, for example, **Alechinsky**, **Alcopley**, **Bissier**, **Degottex**, **Graves**, **Hartung**, **Mathieu** and **Michaux** – were strongly inspired by the Far East, but they absorbed the aesthetics of Asian and sometimes Arabic calligraphy without formal study and interpreted it relatively freely. Western Art Informel concentrated on the act of painting and the initially startling appearance of spots and splatters on canvas and on paper. There was no intention to use abstract gesture for writing letters or texts. The steadily growing fascination with gestural and scriptural elements after 1945 was related to the persistently desolate political situation, the futile search for foundational values, and a widespread retreat to artistic subjectivity. Similarly, in philosophical and literary texts after World War Two, the central themes were ›solitude‹, ›nothingness‹, ›anxiety‹, ›absurdity‹ and ›meaninglessness‹.

A first exhibition addressing the new interest in text and images in Europe, ›Japanese Calligraphy and Western Signs‹, mounted at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1956, reinforced this perception in the West. That same year, Arnold Rüdinger, Art Basel's director at the time, invited the American painter **Sam Francis** to decorate the stairwell with three large-scale paintings. **Francis** was not the only American artist to work in Europe; a few years later, **Mark Tobey** even decided on Basel as his permanent place of residence. Long before conceptual art emerged, Western Europe developed an enduring affinity with scriptural art, and not only from the United States.

Almost a decade earlier, in 1947, the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York mounted an exhibition titled ›The Ideographic Picture‹, for which **Barnett Newman** published his legendary essay on pure painting based on ideas. That was one of the events that sparked the idea of ›Written Art‹ in the USA. As early as 1949, a feature story in Life Magazine described abstract expressionism's ›all over‹ method, applied in either drip or action painting to very large canvases, as an inescapably effective symbolic language, albeit one without tangible content and showing neither letters nor words. Yet this new art, too, looked scriptural. The gestural painting of the New York artists was experienced as groundbreaking in several European locations up to 1959, reinforced by a large number of traveling exhibitions organized by MOMA. Rüdinger spoke of the ›incredibly ample, free gestures‹ of the Americans, summarizing that effect with a terse overstatement: ›the bigger the canvas, the stronger the image.‹





The metaphysical idea that subjective gestures could produce a content with universal meaning developed into a creed in the West. **Masson's** formative influence on **Jackson Pollock** was only noticed later; the decisive factor for parts of the professional world as well as for painters was that artists working in the modes of abstract expressionism and informal art were not reproducing the calligraphies of the Far East and the Arab countries, but seemed to be reinventing art itself: what was coming into being were abstract images rooted in script, yet not susceptible to verbalization.

As part of an exhibition entitled ›Writing and Image‹ (Schrift und Bild) at the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1963, Irmtraud Schaarschmidt-Richter selected works by more than a dozen Japanese Shō-masters for comparison. She considered Asian calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism to be related, although in Asia the focus was still on new approaches to writing familiar characters, albeit in free improvisation. The historic exhibition project in Baden-Baden suggested that **HAP Grieshaber** must be regarded as the most important contemporary ›script‹ artist in Germany. His student **Josua Reichert** was invited to design the catalogue and show numerous works of his own. Today, these artists are not very well known. There was unanimous agreement in Baden-Baden – already in 1963 – that the American **Cy Twombly**, who was living in Rome at the time, was a major contributor to the theme. The young Swiss **Dieter Roth** and **Franz Mon** of Frankfurt, two artists who went beyond Informel, were also introduced there. Pop Art, which eschewed gesture and employed mechanical letters and branding instead, was already fully developed by 1963 and was left out of the Baden-Baden exhibition. But Pop Art and, later, Conceptual Art were also largely engaged with written art, evincing the fact that major economic and cultural changes are always accompanied by new art forms.

THE WAY TO THE PRESENT

The growing fascination with calligraphy and Western characters was linked to a worldwide feeling of powerlessness and a lack of cultural orientation following the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese calligrapher **Yū-ichi Inoue** addressed the cultural feeling of powerlessness in Tokyo after 1945. There was a power-political and cultural vacuum that was filled by the US as a hegemonic power without the New York artists setting the tone in Japan. One of the first New York artist's magazines in 1947/48 was called ›Possibilities.‹ German abstract painters founded the group ›ZEN 49‹ in Munich a year later. When **Barnett Newman** named one of his most important paintings from 1950/51 ›Vir Heroicus Sublimis,‹ he was no longer thinking of Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt or Churchill, but rather of the incumbent American President Harry S. Truman. The scriptural and ›ideographic‹ aspects of painting acquired authoritative status in the post-war period, due to the fact that on a world-historical scale, in the US, in Western Europe and Japan, people were looking for gestures conducive to reconciliation and peace. The artists provided them.

The collector Christian Boehringer applied himself to this theme in 2011 on the occasion of the show ›The Art of Writing – Kunst wird geschrieben‹ in Wiesbaden.



Initially Boehringer, with the assistance of Professors Heinz Kroehl and André Kneib, acquired collections of work in ink by the Japanese artists **Shiryū Morita** and **Yū-ichi Inoue**; three works by **Wang Dongling** of China; and paintings and works on paper by the Japanese **Katsuo Shiraga** and the Korean **Lee Ufan**. To these were added works by the Europeans and Americans **Pierre Alechinsky**, **Karl Otto Götz**, **Adolph Gottlieb**, **Hans Hartung**, **Willem de Kooning**, **Joan Mitchell**, **Robert Motherwell**, **Emil Schumacher**, **KRH Sonderborg**, **Pierre Soulages** and **Antoni Tàpies**. He also acquired relatively early works by **Karel Appel**, **Julius Bissier**, **Peter Brüning**, **Hans Hofmann**, **Franz Kline**, **André Masson**, **Georges Mathieu**, **Henri Michaux**, **Ernst Wilhelm Nay** and **Fritz Winter**. Pop Art or younger works related to conceptual art that made use of script did not make it into the collection; instead, with the help of Karin Adrian von Roques, a third significant group was included, mainly younger paintings, and in one case sculptures, by artists from Iran and the Arab world, including examples from Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Saudi-Arabia, Syria and Tunisia by artists like **Khaled Al Saai**, **Mohammed Essay**, **Ali Omar Ermes**, **Rachid Koraïchi**, **Nja Mahdaoui**, **Farhad Moshiri**, **Ahmed Mater**, **Mehdi Qotbi** and **Charles Hossein Zenderoudi**.

The WRITTEN ART COLLECTION has been curated by Thomas Kellein since 2012. Initially, further historical works, such as those by **Sam Francis** and **Hans Hartung** from the period 1956 to 1958, were acquired. A little later, the name **On Kawara** was on the program with two particularly early ›Date Paintings.‹ Works by **Alighiero Boetti**, **Jenny Holzer**, **Ed Ruscha** and **Lawrence Weiner** were also acquired, thus adding representatives of Pop Art, Arte Povera and Conceptual Art to the list. Instead of pursuing historical depth, which for financial reasons could only be achieved selectively, the WRITTEN ART COLLECTION was to become increasingly contemporary. Thus, in addition to examples by **Siah Armajani**, **John Latham**, **Brice Marden** and **Arnulf Rainer**, comparatively new works by **Etel Adnan**, **Mounira Al Solh**, **Sophie Calle**, **Claudia Comte**, **Tracey Emin**, **Andreas Gursky**, **Richard Jackson**, **Idris Khan**, **William Kentridge**, **Sean Landers**, **Tony Oursler** and **Walid Raad** were adopted into the collection. An extraordinary group of handwritten works by the Belgian **Thierry de Cordier** was devoted to the endeavor of putting ›10,000 definitions of God‹ on paper. The new acquisitions made it clear that the concept of ›Writing,‹ now as ever, comprises not only the written word, both as script and as gesture, but also abstract terms, the theme of the book as such, the hearing of language, as well as the newer artistic media that are being used almost everywhere in parallel to painting and drawing.

In a commissioned work, Armajani combines calligraphy in Farsi with architecture. **Calle** illuminates the subject of tombstones. **Emin** and **Jackson** ›write‹ with neon. **Khan** stamps texts on canvas until they become illegible. **Kentridge** ›narrates‹ the way in which a book is written. **Oursler** presents a sound space made of light and language. The photographer **Gursky** takes his bearings from the novel ›The Man Without Qualities‹ by Robert Musil. The WRITTEN ART COLLECTION also includes books by **Dieter Roth**, early works from the field of concrete poetry by **John Furnival** and **Hansjörg Mayer**, collages by **Hertha Müller**, and a scientific reference library.



In 2014, the Hartung Bergman Foundation in Antibes, together with the Frankfurt-based Written Art Foundation, organized a first symposium on the relationship between Western and Chinese calligraphy. In addition to the art historians Nancy Berliner, Wu Tung Curator of Chinese Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; Johnson Chang, founder of the Hanart Gallery, Hong Kong; Steve Goldberg, professor for Chinese art history at Hamilton College, Clinton, New York; Thomas Kellein as curator; Lothar Ledderose, professor and founder of the Institute for Art History of East Asia at the University of Heidelberg; and the ethnologist and filmmaker Michael Oppitz, Berlin, the artists **André Kneib**, **Liu Dan**, **Qiu Zhijie** and **Lawrence Weiner** participated in the event. The symposium was highly instructive, as Johnson Chang and **Qiu Zhijie** emphasized two factors: In China, the ideas of the ›monument‹ and of public art were almost exclusively represented by works of writing until the middle of the 20th century. After the end of the Mao Zedong era and the country's embrace of contemporary art exhibitions, the millennia-old respect for Chinese characters is finding expression in an art that, for example in the works of **Gu Wenda**, now also produces fictional calligraphy and adopts a critical stance toward the imitation of the old masters.

In 2016, a second symposium focused on ›Art and Writing in the Arab Countries, Iran, and North Africa.‹ The participants were Thomas Kellein; David J. Roxburgh; Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, Professor of Islamic Art History at Harvard University; Kwok Kian Chow, curator and advisor to the National Gallery in Singapore; Alya Sebt as former director of the Marrakech Biennale and subsequently the ifa-Galerie Berlin; the artist group **Slavs and Tatars**; and the photographer, calligrapher and filmmaker **Shirin Neshat**. The increased prominence of artists from the Middle East led to discussions about Arabic calligraphy, the special development of Morocco, Islamic art in Indonesia and Singapore, as well as a re-exploration of the Arabic and Iranian works of the WRITTEN ART COLLECTION. As part of the event, new acquisitions of works by the artists **Etel Adnan**, **Malileh Afnan** and **Mounira al Solh** were shown, as well as the relief with a gas cylinder by **Eric van Hove** titled ›Harragas‹ of 2009, with its blue flames illuminating a term that is exclaimed by African migrants when, on the verge of the perilous Mediterranean crossing, they burn their passports and their fingertips. It was and remains important to delve into the deep cultural roots of the subject.

THE COLLECTOR'S CREED

If one aimed at collecting all art concerned with gesture and script since the second half of the 20th century, the WRITTEN ART COLLECTION would have to include thousands of artists, a task that would lead to exhaustion. If one also wanted to include French surrealist écriture, the idea of automatism, or special genres such as the jointly produced cadavres exquis, one would have to contend with overlapping, often intersecting lines of tradition that would expand the theme of ›image and script‹ to include famous predecessors such as **Mallarmé** or perhaps the futurists.



The oldest works in the WRITTEN ART COLLECTION – from 1944 and 1945 – are by **Willy Baumeister** and **Hans Hofmann**. Christian Boehringer assembled a capacious collection of works by **Hanne Darboven** and **Rebecca Horn**, as well as by the still young **Jorinde Voigt**. There are also a dozen calligraphic works by various personalities from an artists' association in Tokyo.

Since 2012, the main idea for the continuation of the collection has been to endow an artist with a reasonable budget, entrusting him or her with the task of contributing a significant group of works and exhibiting them either as part of a Venice Biennale or in a major contemporary museum. The first choice fell on **Lawrence Weiner**, who was born in the Bronx in 1942. Weiner can be regarded as a particularly important ›script‹ artist from the period after 1968. He is a co-founder of Conceptual Art, but regards himself as a sculptor. His numerous international exhibitions and commissions testify that he is constantly renewing himself, both graphically and in terms of content. After the WRITTEN ART COLLECTION acquired a four-part group of works from Weiner's legendary 1991/92 show ›Displacement‹ at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York, the piece was shown in an exhibition room near the Palazzo Bembo during the 2013 Venice Biennale as one of their ›Collateral Events.‹ Simultaneously, another work, ›The Grace of a Gesture,‹ appeared in ten different languages on vaporetto traveling along the Grand Canal. Weiner had installed this work, which he designed letter by letter, both in an exhibition room and on the Venetian boats, conjoining, respectively, the Chinese and Japanese, the Hebrew and Arabic, German and Russian, French and Spanish as well as Italian and English versions of the same text, each pair on one vaporetto. The work's quiet message of peace was linked to the collection's historical idea of building bridges between cultures.

The second ›Collateral Event‹ in 2015 was held with Jenny Holzer, who was born in Ohio in 1950 and resides in New York. The show was mounted in no lesser venue than the Museo Correr, and there in the historic Sala di Quattro Porte, where a renovation by the architect Carlo Scarpa ensured that the room was available neither as a ›white cube‹ nor as a historical backdrop. The visitor encountered Terrazzo and Murano chandeliers next to permanently installed metal fittings, frames and pedestals, an ambience that seemed at once sacral and in constant use. Holzer selected new, colorful oil paintings for the room, and complemented these in the hallways adjoining the exhibition space proper with screen-printed pictures from the period before 2013. The title for the exhibition was ›War Paintings‹. Her works dealt with the behavior of the American military during the Iraq war, when suspects were tortured and killed in detention centers without trial. The WRITTEN ART COLLECTION acquired eighteen works on canvas by the artist between 2006 and 2014.

The third Venice guest performance in 2017 was prepared with **Shirin Neshat**, born in Iran in 1957 and now living in New York, whose photo series ›The Home of My Eyes‹ with calligraphy in Farsi was originally commissioned in Baku. Neshat had selected, photographed and interviewed people in Azerbaijan. The subjects of the portraits, whose appearance reminded the viewer of Europeans, Russians, Iranians, or Asians, were asked to reflect on what ›home‹ meant to them as they posed for their pictures. Most of them folded their hands in front of their chests.



The photos, covered with Farsi script, hung in the Museo Correr's Sala di Quattro Porte, in the middle of which hung a large Gothic Madonna on the wall as a part of the permanent collection. Like many artists engaged with Written Art, **Neshat** combines various media in order to convey the very fundamental questions of her work as intensely as possible.

A Chinese artist commissioned by the WRITTEN ART COLLECTION in 2015 was **Qiu Zhijie** of Beijing, who created 24 ›World Maps‹ with ink on paper for the collection. **Qiu**, born in 1969, decided to choose his themes in concordance with historical, philosophical and anthropological questions. Several works in the format of 240 x 120 cm merged into one another. The maps produced from 2017 to 2019 are dedicated to utopias and voyages, to our social relationships and interests, to psychology, medicine, religion, nutrition and science. These ink-drawn ideas, elaborated in Chinese and English, form part of fictional maps that are crossed by equally fictional waterways, railroad lines and mountain slopes. Here and there we see fish or mythical creatures. As with the work of **Lawrence Weiner**, **Jenny Holzer** and **Shirin Neshat**, we encounter conceptual and imaginative themes that concern people in different countries and probably will continue to do so in the future. **Qiu's** commissioned works were exhibited in the UCCA in Beijing in autumn 2018. With assistance from the WRITTEN ART COLLECTION, **Qiu** has produced a limited edition artist book. The WRITTEN ART COLLECTION is now collaborating with the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich. The future of the world's art is open. It is happening every day. It consists of a dialogue between the various media and cultures. In this conversation, the interplay of words and images is indispensable.