

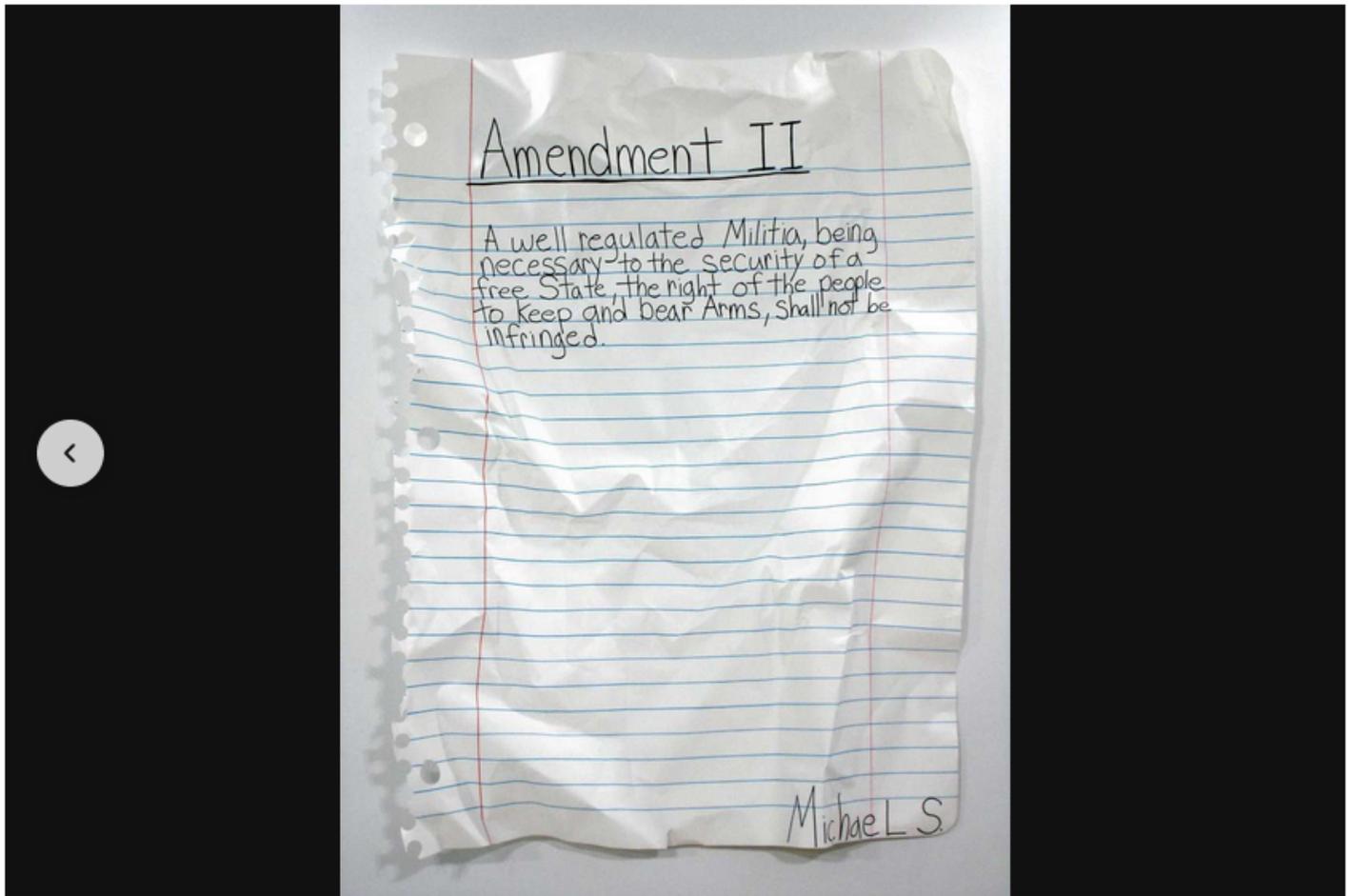


Text appeal

Three-part exhibit examines use of words in visual art

Amy Griffin

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Michael Scoggins, Amendment II, 2008, marker, colored pencil on paper, 67 x 51 inches

Language and visual imagery have long been linked. Even in the earliest cave paintings, images substituted for words. Visual artists have been incorporating text into their work for hundreds of years, but with modernism the practice became more common.

Julie Lohnes, the curator of art collections and exhibitions at the Mandeville Gallery at Union College, sees a shift in the way artists of the 21st century use text: "toward a blending of conceptual and formal methods," she writes in the catalog essay for "Textual," on view now in the gallery.

The show is one of three exhibits at the school under the group name "*Mot Juste: A Celebration of Text and Language in Contemporary Visual Arts.*" Mot Juste" also includes "Artists' Books: Where to put the apostrophe?" installed in the Lally Reading Room of the Schaffer Library and "Distracted Wreading [From Structural Film to Digital Poetics]" a one-night multimedia event in the newly renovated Karp Hall scheduled for early February.

Lohnes has chosen the work of eight artists who use text in a variety of ways, both formally and conceptually. For several artists, language is actually the subject of the work.

Sujin Lee's video works are devoted to books. "The Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Project," a work in progress, is a fairly straightforward video documentary inspired by Cha's book, "*Dictee*," in which Lee has interviewed scholars and friends of the late writer about the book. There isn't much of an introduction to Cha in this film. On my own, I learned that Cha was also a performance artist and filmmaker and that "*Dictee*," published in 1982 — the year Cha was murdered at the age of 31 by a serial rapist — became a classic of postmodern literature. Perhaps those details are left out on purpose. Lee's focus, after all, is on Cha's use of language, not her biography. "She did something with language that is hard to do when speaking," says one of the speakers.

Bang Geul Han's interactive video searches Twitter in real time for specific words and then has tweets read back by a couple sitting at a table that have been previously filmed speaking various words. The result is a disjointed sequence of dialogue meant to evoke the difficulties of human communication.

Sam Winston makes drawings out of typed letters and numbers that read as fairly minimal abstract designs when looked at from a step back. The designs are based on symbols of the periodic table, each one representing a different object. A sphere within a cube inside a larger cube contains the chemical elements that make up a book.

Like Winston, some of these artists use text in part for its visual effects, sometimes in the form of enlarged handwriting or simulated typewriting. Shanti Grumbine meticulously cuts text from newspapers like a censor redacting documents. These cut pieces are then rearranged into delicate collages, rendering the news unreadable.

Amanda Tiller comments on pop culture with her text-based pieces, such as an embroidered family tree for all of the fictional characters played by the actor Fred Savage, while Michael Scoggins' oversized lined notebook paper pieces take a political tonem, with giant paper fighter planes fighting in the middle of the rotunda. Cui Fei's photos of grapevines that resemble Chinese calligraphy have a lovely minimalist quality.

Alex Gingrow's installation "The Disposable Day Desk Calendar" is diaristic. She's created her own day-by-day desk calendar with inspirational quotes and a personal notation on each. Each day has been printed in order in a bound volume organized by month. By turns self-deprecating, humorous and heartbreaking, the entries form an engaging self-portrait of the artist in 12 volumes. Lined up on a desk, they are there to be read—with a chair and gloves for handling them. The piece connects well to the other exhibit on campus, "Artists' Books."

For this exhibit, installed in the library, Mandeville curatorial assistant Sarah Mottalini has found examples of books made as art by artists, as opposed to books about art. Many of these were found in the library's own circulating collection, some erroneously, such as Lawrence Weiner's "Statements," now out of print and rare. Many of the books on display are under glass for their own protection, but that can lead to a rather frustrating viewing experience, as only one or two pages are visible in some. Luckily, three books are available for flipping through. A first edition of John Cage's 1961 "Silence" is one of these, with the original return card still inside the back cover — due the first time on Jan. 16, 1964. Mottalini has chosen a nice range of examples here in terms of style, including traditionally bound books as well as some with experimental bindings.

This multipart cross-disciplinary exhibit is a thought-provoking look at art that can be read and books as art objects and the relationship between words and pictures.

Amy Griffin is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.