Lesson 3: Text in Art
IMPRINT artists of focus: Dotty Attie, Kerry James Marshall, James Mills

Project Introduction:
By looking at examples of artwork that uses text or combines text with image, students will learn how words can create contradiction, explanation, and/or transformation of the environment in which the art is placed. Students will look at those IMPRINT artists that use text, investigating the validity of such a medium. Students will be asked to question the visual strategies employed in advertisement billboards, and their effect on society. They will create their own work that includes literary support of an image, or works without an image at all. It is essential to explain how text should not only act as a mode for telling, but should question and create discussion or debate. Students will learn about the aesthetic use of text with or without image, focusing on the visual success of text style and sizes in relation to image and format.

Objectives:
1. Students will learn that art can exist without image, using text alone. IMPRINT artist James Mills is a good example.
2. Students will learn to critically read text as well as the image when looking at artworks with text, learning how text can create clarity, protest, or ambiguity.
3. Students will create works of art that use text, approaching the assignment in a variety of ways in order to discover their most effective visual solution.
4. Students will examine images using text to determine which solutions are visually successful and why.
5. Students will be made aware of the potential of this project in application to future graphic design work.
6. Students will learn how artists have used the medium of the billboard as a means to undermine techniques in media and mass marketing.

Looking and Reacting:
Students will be asked a variety of questions in response to the images in IMPRINT. It is encouraged that the students take a few minutes to look at the work, without any talking. They will be asked to think about what each work means, followed by questions such as:
1. In looking at the work of James Mills, what is your initial response? Is this art? Why or why not? In considering the context of billboard, bus shelter, or newspaper insert, does the work change its meaning? How so?
2. How do the words in Kerry James Marshall’s piece add to the work? What happens if we were to take the words away? Does its meaning change?
3. In Dotty Attie’s work, what do you think the words mean? Do the words mean the same thing if they are taken away from the image? Does her piece “work” without the text?
4. In all three images, how does the treatment of font size, style, and placement effect the work? Does the text translate well into the larger scale of a billboard? Why, or why not?
5. How can you use text differently to create artwork? Can you think of any examples you’ve seen that seem successful to you? (This may be a good time for the instructor to mention other examples, such as Vernon Fisher, Barbara Kruger, Guerrilla Girls, or Lesley Dill.)
It may also be helpful to study advertisements, signs, and product design. Students should become astute observers of the outside world and learn to recognize different ways of using text as a means to advertise in the public arena.

Art Activities:
   This lesson is best carried out by using the computer to create text in many sizes and styles, using a collage technique to apply it beneath or to superimpose over an image or images. If there is limited access to a computer, students can use stencils, text from magazines and newspapers, letterpress, or stickers. Students should approach the assignment in a variety of ways, experimenting with sources from popular culture, mass media, art history, and created imagery. Listed below are just a few ways students might incorporate image with text.
   • Students can create text first by using it as an impetus for imagery. Students should be asked to think about song lyrics, poetry, clichés, euphemisms, and controversial topics in order to aid their brainstorming. The artist Lesley Dill’s incorporation of Emily Dickinson’s poetry with her own imagery is a good example of this type of approach.
   • Students might want to create commentary on existing advertisements, altering images from the media. Images from the Adbusters campaign and the Billboard Liberation Front are good examples of such visual media manipulation.
   • Imagery that accompanies the text can be created in a wide variety of ways including digital processes, scanned materials, Photoshop, photography, drawing, painting, or collage. Students may choose to create an image from scratch, focusing on a topic that they deem worthy of commentary.
   • Students may choose to adapt an image from popular culture or art history and alter it, as the Guerrilla Girls did with a Manet painting to create a statement about female representation in New York’s Metropolitan Museum.

Students will also be made aware of how text size, style, and placement might alter meaning and should experiment with their graphics. Text that changes within the piece should be discussed, using varying levels of opacity and translucency, shifting scale, or direction of text in order to transform meaning. In all events of art making, students will be encouraged to stretch their ways of perceiving, breaking from traditional formats and materials.

Assessment:
   Students will be evaluated on their ability to:
   1. Thoughtfully discuss many different images and techniques of creating art with text.
   2. Create sensitive work that shows a unique understanding of how text and image can work together to question, suggest, or ask for a new understanding of a topic.
   3. Use a variety of approaches and ways of brainstorming to create an image with text.
   4. Experiment in the treatment of images in ways that expand their understanding and appreciation of contemporary art.

Related artists:
Other project ideas:
Silk screening t-shirts with “Text in Art”, making individual “business” cards that incorporate the idea of text as art (using Adrian Piper’s card project as an example).

**IMPRINT IMPRESSIONS: An art-making unit based on the exhibition**

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**Introduction**

What is IMPRINT?
IMPRINT is the largest temporary public art project to ever take place in Philadelphia, created by The Print Center and curated by board member Joan Wadleigh Curran. IMPRINT will use images from six different contemporary artists (3 of which are from Philadelphia) in an array of formats ranging from billboards, bus shelters, paper coffee cups, the Philadelphia Inquirer’s Sunday Magazine, as well as a gallery exhibit at The Print Center. It will take place in Philadelphia from September 3-November 9, 2002.

How does IMPRINT engage the public?
IMPRINT raises an awareness of public issues in public spaces. IMPRINT steps outside of the museum walls to present art, reaching masses that might not otherwise engage in the visual arts. The content of IMPRINT addresses issues ranging from sexism to class and racial awareness to confrontational parody of advertisement. IMPRINT seeks to give voice to an aesthetic not commonly seen on billboards, bus shelters, and coffee cups—one that speaks of aging, housing, fair medical treatment, and appreciation of beauty in an otherwise consumerist environment. Although all the artists work in different media, the use of digital technology translates their work into large-scale mass media advertising venues, which inevitably comment on traditional use of such venues.

What does the educational component of IMPRINT seek to do?
The educational component of IMPRINT seeks to reach those who can effectively inform a diverse population in Philadelphia: public school art teachers. We have an exceptional opportunity to inform the educators of our youth about our project and hope that with your help, we can create dialogue, criticism, and appreciation of public contemporary art in your school. Students will analyze images from IMPRINT, and create work that responds to the rich variety of subjects raised from such a project. It is hoped that such an approach will go beyond the school walls to encompass greater understanding within students’ families and their communities.
How do the lessons address Philadelphia’s educational standards and benchmarks? The IMPRINT lessons use a discipline based art education format in that they address issues concerning art history, art criticism, art production, and the aesthetics of art. All of the lesson plans developed for the project IMPRINT comply with the Philadelphia educational standards and benchmarks. Students will learn problem solving and technical skills in the process of making art. These lessons will also teach comprehension of and the application of the artistic process and abstract concepts. The lessons challenge the students to use creative thinking skills as well as verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

The artists in IMPRINT:

- **Dotty Attie**’s paintings and prints juxtapose images and text in order to pose questions about their paired meaning. Her images create a provocative visual narrative that encourage the viewer to contemplate new meanings based on their own experience. Attie’s work is familiar to a national audience through exhibitions at such venues as the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum.

- **John Coplans** makes large scale photographs of his aging body. His arresting photographs shatter conventional expectations. They call attention to our discomfort with the aging process by presenting images of the aging body rather than the conventions of youth and beauty. Coplan’s images are internationally known as is his writing as critic and former editor of *Artforum* magazine.

- **Susan Fenton** hand-colors her photographs of figures in controlled environments suffused with mystery. Fenton’s images flirt with the conventions of fashion and advertising and create powerful allegories about the relationship between beauty and adornment of the human form and its power to transform. Fenton’s photographs are well known both locally and nationally. She is on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania and St. Joseph’s University.

- **Kerry James Marshall** uses the format of the comic book to present aspects of contemporary African American life and to confront contradictions inherent in American life. In his comic book project, “Rhythm Mastr”, Marshall uses figures from African art as superheroes who battle the forces of corruption and violence against the backdrop of urban decay. Winner of the prestigious MacArthur Prize (1997), Chicago based Kerry James Marshall’s work has been included in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of Art and Documents X in Kassel, Germany.

- **Virgil Marti**’s work addresses the relationship between art and mass culture, good and bad taste, nostalgia and issues of class. Marti’s images of bonsai trees use the seductive conventions of advertising to present images of stylized nature, displaced yet beautiful, full of tenderness and saturated color. Marti has received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Fellowship and a Pew Fellowship.

- **James Mills** combines text and context to surprise the complacent viewer and pose questions about the role of art and advertising. In his sculpture and installations, Mills uses
commonplace words in different contexts to encourage new thinking about the realities of life. Mills has recently shown his work at the ICA in Philadelphia, and has received a Pew Fellowship.