

# Norton Simon Museum For Immediate Release

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## *Word as Image*

August 11, 2023 – January 8, 2024

**Pasadena, CA**—The Norton Simon Museum presents *Word as Image*, an exhibition showcasing 20th century artists who experimented with letters, words, and symbols as visual motifs. Culled from the Museum’s collection, the objects on view offer humorous and thought-provoking encounters between pictorial and linguistic modes of expression. Artists whose work is in the exhibition include Pablo Picasso, Liubov Popova, John Cage, Andy Warhol and others.

At the beginning of the 20th century, words appeared as elements in avant-garde compositions, where they were used to break down distinctions between art and daily life. In Picasso’s *Still Life with Bottle of Marc* (1911), splintered lines and shapes reinvent the genre of trompe l’oeil still-life. Only the legible letters “E,” “vie” and “Marc” prompt the viewer to perceive the central object, a bottle of brandy, and recognize the composition as a café scene. In Liubov Popova’s Cubo-Futurist painting *The Traveler* (1915), snippets of Russian words like журналы (zhurnaly), meaning journals, and II кл, meaning second class, evoke a train’s physical environment. Partial bits of text parallel the fragmented appearance of Cubist and Futurist abstraction while capturing the dynamism of early 20th-century modernity.



Liubov Popova (Russian, 1889–1924)  
*The Traveler*, 1915  
Oil on canvas  
Norton Simon Art Foundation

As the century progressed, Pop and Conceptual artists responded critically to their social and cultural climates by inventing visual forms, sometimes co-opting contemporary cityscapes full of billboards and graffiti-covered walls. Claes Oldenburg and Ed Ruscha evoked Los Angeles through prints of

monumental architectural letters, as both considered the city's signage part of its essential identity. Similarly, Warhol's iconic *Campbell's Soup* series (the Museum's edition is dated 1968) appropriates the visual language of mass production and typographic design to blur the distinction between fine art and advertisement. Language also serves as an inside joke for many works in the exhibition, like Robert Heinecken's photogram *Recto/Verso, 1/5* (1988), which offers a critique of fashion magazines and beauty standards. Here a single legible headline, "A Neutral Presence," ironically accompanies a distorted image of reversed text and superimposed women's bodies, thereby interrupting the passive consumption of mass media.

The exhibition features artworks that engage linguistic and art historical themes simultaneously. In Arthur Secunda's kaleidoscopic lithograph *Cathedral Voices* (1969), inspired by Claude Monet's paintings of Rouen cathedral, intentionally illegible letters conjure the acoustic and optical experiences that one may have inside a religious building. John Cage, in his own nod to art of the recent past—*Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel* (1969), an homage to the great conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp—collaborated with printers, researchers and a graphic designer. The resulting sheets of Plexiglas are printed with fragmented letters that appear to float and fall in a kind of three-dimensional typographic symphony. Designed so that it could be reassembled to create new visual compositions, it likewise uses words and letters as a means of interrogating the creative process.

Spanning the comical to the political to the conceptual, *Word as Image* calls our attention to how we are constantly "reading the image" in and out of museum spaces. Many of the artworks express ambivalence about the meaning and legibility of the text contained within, emphasizing instead the formal appearance of letters or numbers. As such, artists challenge us to consider language and image anew, by positioning words as an essential part of visual culture.

*Word as Image* is organized by Alex Kaczinski, the Museum's graduate intern for the 2022-23 academic year. It is on view in the Museum's Focus Gallery on the main level from August 11, 2023 through January 8, 2024.

### **About the Norton Simon Museum**

The Norton Simon Museum is known around the world as one of the most remarkable private art collections ever assembled. Over a 30-year period, industrialist Norton Simon (1907–1993) amassed an astonishing collection of European art from the Renaissance to the 20th century, and a stellar collection of South and Southeast Asian art spanning 2,000 years. Modern and Contemporary Art from Europe and the United States, acquired by the former Pasadena Art Museum, also occupies an

important place in the Museum's collections. The Museum houses more than 12,000 objects, roughly 1,000 of which are on view in the galleries and gardens.

**Location:** The Norton Simon Museum is located at 411 W. Colorado Blvd. at Orange Grove Boulevard in Pasadena, Calif., at the intersection of the Foothill (210) and Ventura (134) freeways. For general Museum information, please call (626) 449-6840 or visit [nortonsimon.org](http://nortonsimon.org). **Hours:** The Museum is open Thursday through Monday, 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. (Saturday to 7 p.m.). It is closed on Tuesday and Wednesday. **Admission:** General admission is \$15 for adults and \$12 for seniors. Members, students with I.D., and patrons age 18 and under are admitted free of charge. The Museum is wheelchair accessible. **Parking:** Parking is free but limited, and no reservations are necessary. **Public Transportation:** Pasadena Transit stops directly in front of the Museum. Please visit <http://pasadenatransit.net> for schedules. The MTA bus line #180/181 stops in front of the Museum. The Memorial Park Station on the MTA Gold Line, the closest Metro Rail station to the Museum, is located at 125 E. Holly St. at Arroyo Parkway. Please visit [www.metro.net](http://www.metro.net) for schedules. **Planning your Visit:** For up-to-date information on our guidelines and protocols, please visit [nortonsimon.org/visit](http://nortonsimon.org/visit). **Changes starting July 1, 2023:** Please note that admission fee will increase to \$20 adults/\$15 seniors beginning July 1, 2023. We will also stay open to 7:00 p.m. on Fridays, and resume our policy of free admission for all on the first Friday of the month from 4:00 – 7:00 p.m.