Anna Saccani

# LetterScapes
## A Global Survey of Typographic Installations

365 illustrations, 290 in color

Thames & Hudson

# Reading by the Sea

Foreword by Leonardo Sonnoli

**Leonardo Sonnoli** is an award-winning Italian designer and lecturer. After graduating in 1962 from the High Institute of Industrial Arts in Urbino he went on to Tassinari/Vetta Studio in Trieste, where he is now a partner. Between 1990 and 2001 he was Creative Director at Dolcini Associati Studio, working on visual identities, cultural event communication, signage systems and exhibition graphics. In 2002, along with Paolo Tassinari and Pierpaolo Vetta, he founded CODEsign.

Today, the use of writing in public spaces has moved away from the old social and descriptive functions of public lettering, which were linked with expressions of power and its architecture. Instead, this writing commemorates events or people, designates a spatial or commercial identity, or is a form of artistic expression, often becoming an installation in its own right and an integral part of architecture.

This book, the result of research carried out for a doctoral thesis at Venice's IUAV university, is intended as a modest contribution to the current literature on the subject of public lettering. Given the broad nature of the topic, it was inevitable that limits would need to be imposed on the research. This, however, is what makes the book unique.

The starting point is the definition of 'public lettering' given by Armando Petrucci as: 'Any type of writing designed to be used in open spaces – but also in confined spaces – to allow multiple readings (group or mass readings) and at a distance, of a text written on an exposed surface; a necessary condition is that the display writing be sufficiently large, and present the message (verbal and/or visual) in a sufficiently discernible and clear way.'[1]

The public nature of the projects in this book – that is, their location in places accessible to all – was an essential criterion in the selection, and this means that they were chosen on the basis of their social value, in addition to their permanent character in the spaces they occupy.

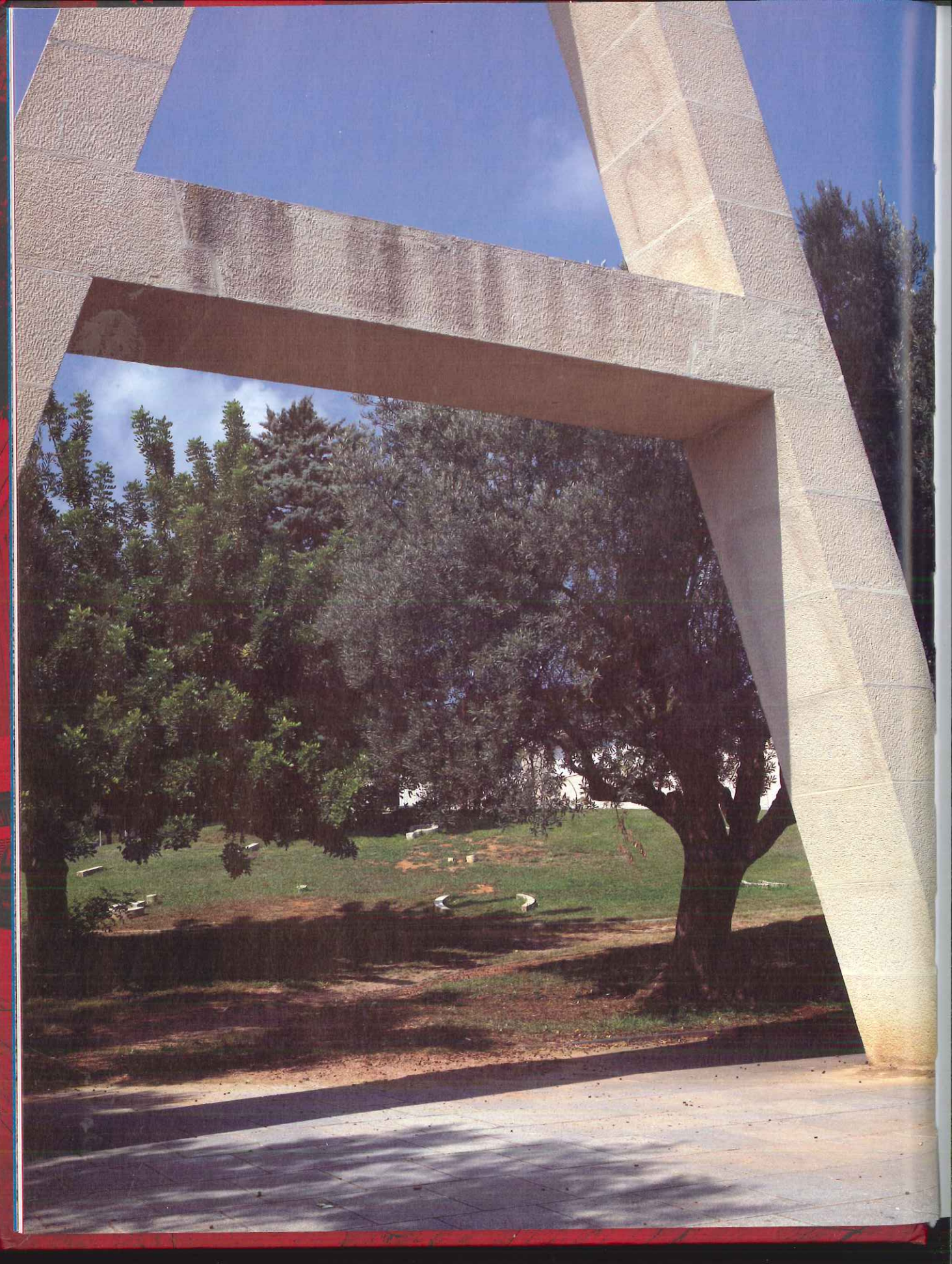
Almost all the projects featured employ the Latin alphabet. Western culture has a history of figurative representation and of speech very different from those of other alphabetic cultures. Where language plays a public role of stating, remembering and celebrating, it has long been translated visually through a semantically appropriate rendition of the letters, using repeated forms, even if calligraphic in style, and sometimes specifically designed for the occasion.

The selection in this volume is obviously not exhaustive, and is only representative of the contemporary scene. While many examples have been omitted, those featured are sufficient to highlight the changes in the use of lettering that have taken place over time – both in the epigraphic tradition that has represented public institutions since the Roman Empire, and in the commercial use of writing, which invaded cities from the late nineteenth century onwards.

In recent years, cities have increasingly shifted the management of public spaces from public to private interests. This is one of several reasons behind the change in the role of words and letters in such spaces. The expansion of graphic design beyond the confines of the page has also made an important contribution to a change in approach; this was undoubtedly the result of artistic experimentation in the post-war period, using language as visual material and, above all, translating concepts into typography.

However, even with a carefully chosen font, the emotion that comes from reading a text by Katherine Mansfield half-submerged in the salt-scented sea, with the slanting light of the setting sun over Wellington, is difficult to describe in words. Because reading is not just a matter of seeing.

[1] Armando Petrucci, *La scrittura: Ideologia e rappresentazione*, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, Turin, 1986.



# Introduction

More than ever, public lettering can be seen everywhere we look in the contemporary world. Road signs, shop names, advertisements and graffiti cover the walls of our cities. These messages penetrate into our minds, informing, appealing, persuading or inciting. Painted, drawn, sculpted or cast, assembled in metal, plastic or stone, the words become tangible physical entities in the landscape, contributing to its personality and unique identity.

Often the messages are too many and too confusing. They blend into a background noise, with no individual voice emerging from the general hum. But there are times when, suddenly, something will attract our attention. Intent on our daily chores, heads down, we find our eyes turn to seize this new message. A word, phrase or sometimes just a letter becomes familiar and part of our landscape.

A public lettering is made unique by the relationships it sets up with what is around it: not a blank page, but the sky, the streets, the sunlight with the shadows it creates, the rain making the colours brighter, combined with slow erosion from the passage of time. To this we can add people, moving, gazing, more or less attentively, their curiosity driving them to find something new and different in an everyday landscape. In the words of Jock Kinneir, a major figure in the study of this discipline: 'If public lettering was just a larger size of type there would be little to interest us. Yet, quite apart from the question of the extra dimension, there are obviously a host of different relationships to be explored. Buildings and people, rather than pages, are the frame of reference, and sometimes even the sky and open fields.'[1]

This volume is an exploration of typographical installations created between the mid-twentieth century and the present day, selected from the most important works throughout the world. All the works discussed are sited in public or semi-public places and were intended as permanent fixtures, and so this book can also be used as a guide. It aims to highlight the graphic element in the installations, along with the communicative power of the arts of typography and lettering, demonstrating that these works deserve as much attention and appreciation as do architectural and artistic creations.

**Opposite: Joan Brossa, *Transitable Visual Poem*, Barcelona.**


The New York Times
LAS VEGAS
LOS ANGELES
MEXICO
MIAMI-HAWAII PUERTO RICO-BERMUDA-BAHAMAS
EUROPE
SOUTH AMERICA
MEDITERRANEAN
MIDDLE EAST-GREEK ISLAND CRUISES


LEISIOIS
TERROR

## The Installations

Permanence was one of the main criteria in deciding which works to include in this collection – a decision that led to many ephemeral typographical installations, such as exhibition pavilions and staging, being excluded. The permanence of an installation underlines the commitment of the institutions and the community towards that particular work. However, even permanent installations may become altered as a result of damage from vandalism, or show signs of aging over time. Robert Indiana's sculpture *LOVE*, for example, has had to be re-fenced and repainted from time to time. One of the letters in Maarten de Reus's *G.R.O.E.N.* had to be replaced after a car ran off the road and destroyed it (although it saved the driver's life). And of the four original Bankside typographic fences designed by Caruso St John, only two have survived: one has been vandalized and another replaced by a new installation.

Siting an installation in a public or easily accessible location encourages spontaneous and unexpected interactions between the work and the visitor, particularly where many people pass through an area, bringing it to life. The word 'public' derives from the Latin *publicus*, meaning 'of the people'. This implies that a 'public space' is a space belonging to all – a part of a city, such as a street, square, park, railway station, town hall, library or theatre. Historically, it can be compared to the ancient Greek *agora*, the Roman *forum* and the great consular roads, medieval squares and more recent major urban works, such as the Parisian boulevards designed by Baron Hausmann in the mid-nineteenth century. Spaces are not merely physical entities; they are also symbolic of the civil liberty of democracy.

The landscapes in which these installations are showcased are many and varied, ranging from urban to natural. Some are sited in the centres of major cities (in New York, Rudolph de Harak's digital clock and Michael Bierut / Pentagram's signage for the *New York Times* building; in London, Caruso St John's Bankside Signage System; in Madrid, Estudio Sic & Buj+Colón's Monument to the Victims of 11 March 2004). Others are found in smaller towns (in a busy, partly pedestrianized district of Amsterdam, Lawrence Weiner's *A Translation from One Language to Another*; in the piazza of the small Emilian town of Carpi, Italy, BBPR's Museum-Monument to the Deportee for Political and Racial Reasons). Yet others are sited in urban suburbs (in Pantin, north-east of Paris, Pierre di Sciullo's installation for the National Dance Centre; in Ede, in the Netherlands, Karel Martens's facade for the Veenman printers). They might also be found in rural locations (in the Pentland Hills, in the countryside near Edinburgh, Ian Hamilton Finlay's Little Sparta).

The installations discussed here are almost always 'site specific', a term generally used in contemporary artistic and creative fields to describe a project designed for a particular location. Close links with the environment in which it stands are central to the development of a site-specific work, taking in not only space but also the history, architecture and culture of the place. This can be seen in the installations of designers such as Attila F. Kovács, whose work on the House of Terror Museum in Budapest uses materials and words to emphasize the facade of the very building in which opponents of the Nazi and Communist regimes were tortured to death; Lawrence Weiner, whose series of manhole covers for the city of New York poetically evokes the grid plan typical of large US cities; Caruso St John, whose signage system uses different forms and materials to represent the diversity of the people living in the regenerated Southwark area of London; Ashton Raggatt McDougall, who, for the Marion Cultural Centre, used the word as one element in the generation of a sense of community identity; and Gordon Young and Why Not Associates, who in all their works create relationships that are different each time, the product of their sensitivity to context.

**Opposite top: Michael Bierut / Pentagram, signage for the *New York Times* building, New York City.**

**Opposite bottom: Attila F. Kovács, House of Terror Museum, Budapest.**

In addition to these site-specific works, there are others that were not designed for the context in which they are located but nevertheless succeed in establishing an important dialogue with it. The most striking example is probably Robert Indiana's sculpture *LOVE*. Copies of this work can be found in many different cities, on a variety of sites including museums and private and public areas. The version in Philadelphia was particularly well received; the city has embraced the sculpture with such enthusiasm that the name of the square where it is sited has been changed from JFK Plaza to, inevitably, Love Park.

This book also examines a number of works in locations that are not strictly public, but are nevertheless easily accessed. One such is Little Sparta, the private garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay's house that establishes so close a relationship with the southern Scottish landscape that it seems to become an organic part of it. Also included are a number of typographical installations connected with museums, which, without being museum exhibits, form a structural component of the building itself. Sometimes the installation determines the physical layout of the museum space, as in the case of Smith-Miller+Hawkinson, Barbara Kruger, Quennell Rothschild and Guy Nordenson's *Imperfect Utopia*. Visible from an aeroplane and even from a satellite, the large letters forming the words '*PICTURE THIS*' generate a variety of spaces for the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, North Carolina. In other cases, it is the museum itself that becomes writing, taking its existence from it, as at the Museum-Monument to the Deportee for Political and Racial Reasons in Carpi, for which BBPR designed a commemorative space with rooms whose walls are covered in phrases and the names of victims of concentration camps, and, in the outside courtyard, steles bearing the names of the camps.

Finally, there are installations that, although they belong to buildings or other structures that are privately owned, are sited so that they can be seen by anyone passing by – for example, Ahn Sang-soo's Hangul Gate, which stands before the entrance to his house; the facade of the *New York Times* building designed by Michael Bierut / Pentagram; or Rudolph de Harak's digital clock displayed on a private building, presently owned by the Rockrose Development Corporation, but designed with the specific intention of providing a service to people using John Street in Manhattan.

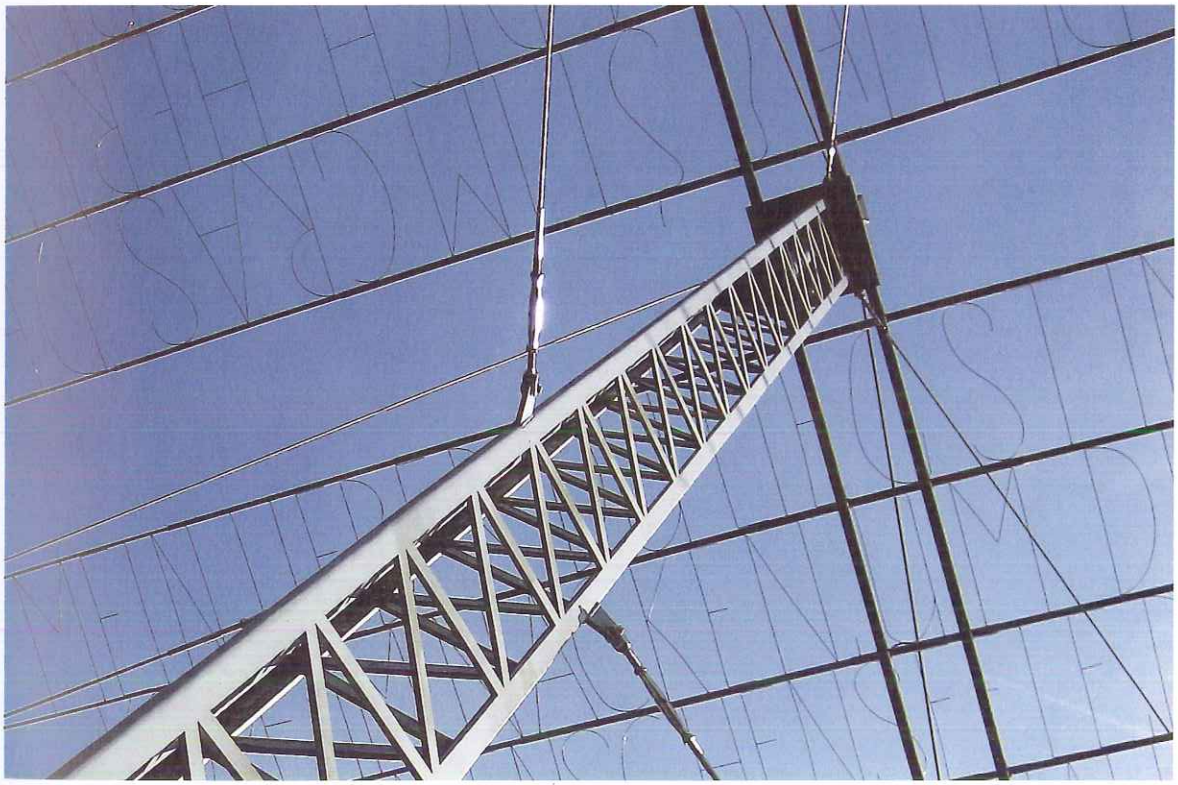
**Interaction with People**

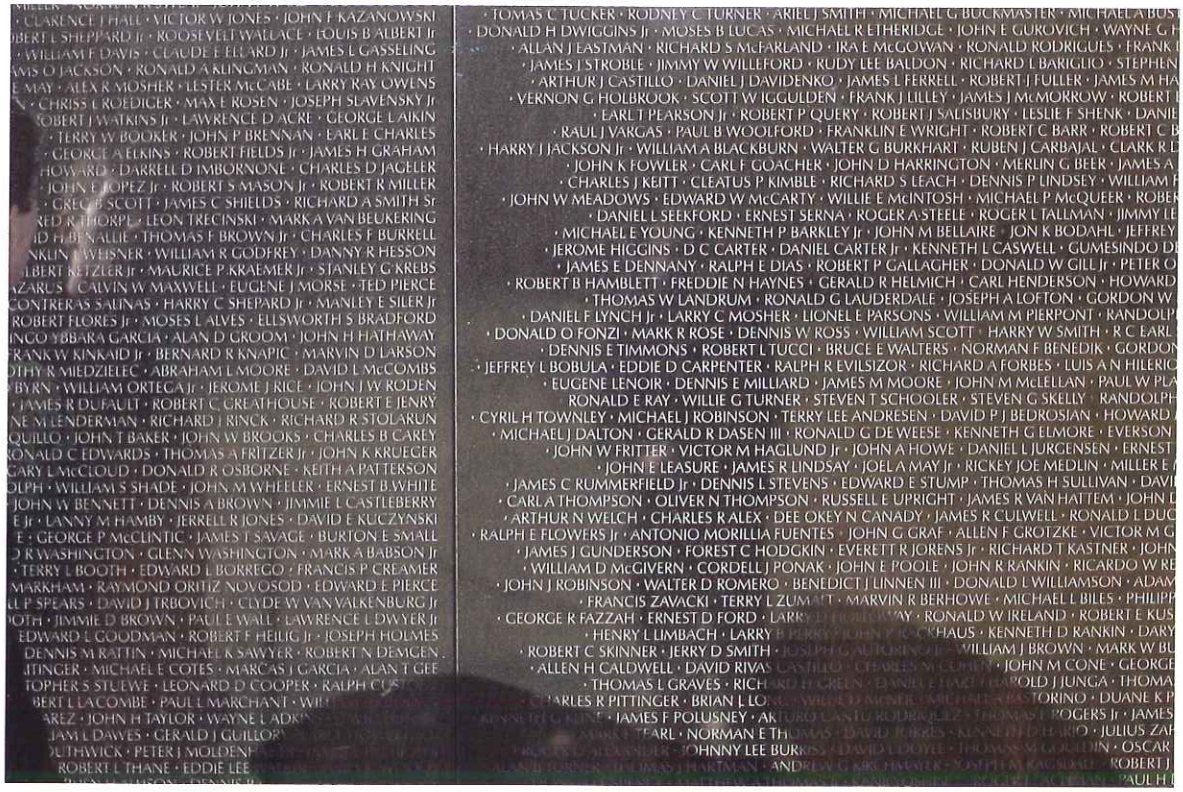
The first contact between installation and visitor is visual. The study of lettering is a discipline that is based above all on observation, as Phil Baines and Catherine Dixon point out in their book *Signs*: 'It is about seeing the letters which surround us in our public spaces; about seeing that which all too often we don't see: the directional signs for road networks passed by in cars at speed; the inscriptions or names on familiar buildings; even the characters found on the most mundane functional objects of our physical environment such as access grills for public utilities.'[2]

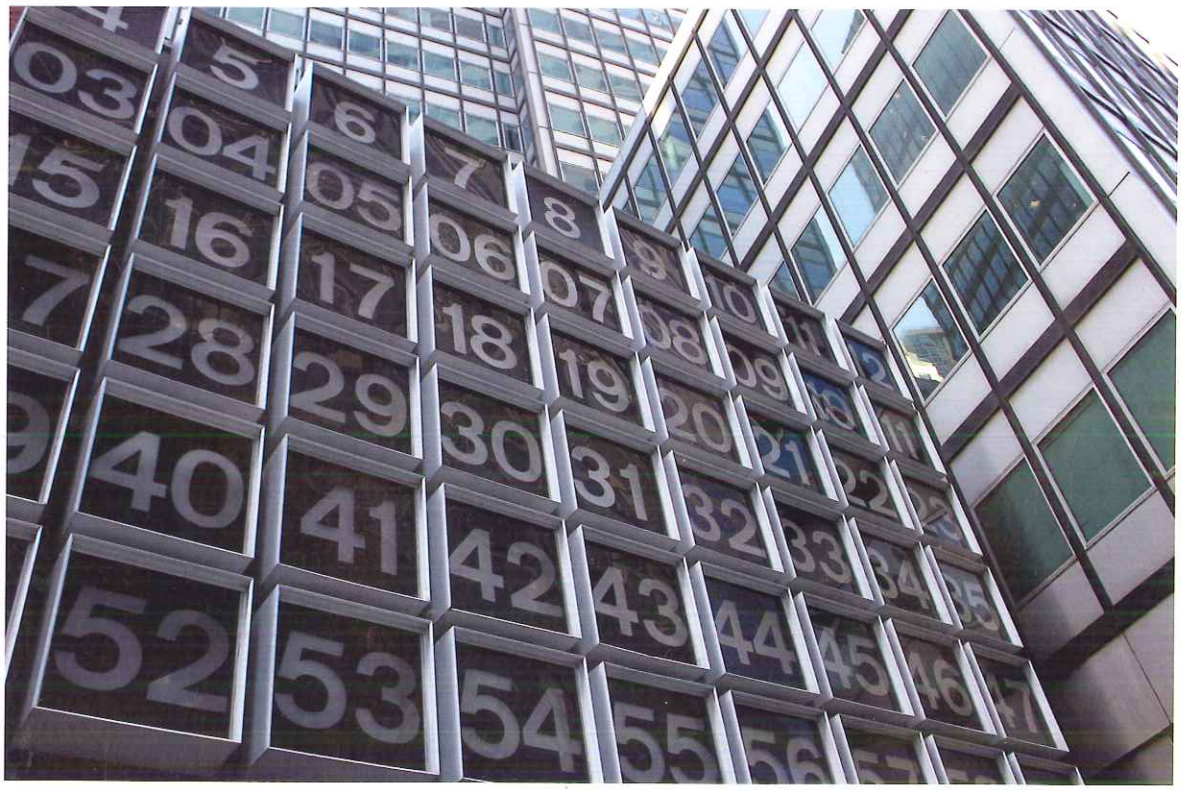
Some installations do require particularly careful observation. One example is Ilya Kabakov's *Antenna*. The text, composed of thin metal wire, is barely visible against its background of sky. Fundamental to this work – the secondary title of which is *Looking up, Reading the Words* – is the ability to look carefully. In Josep Maria Subirachs's installation for the new Barcelona town hall, the lettering that spells out the city's name is so closely integrated with the modular design of the facade that it is practically invisible. It is said that even Subirachs himself was unable to read it the first time he saw it. It becomes a kind of game to puzzle out the inscription, just as with Joan Brossa's *Visual Poem for a Facade*, where we need to understand the relationships between the letters arranged on the wall. We slowly perceive that the fifty letters making up the multicoloured horizontal sign are repeated and arranged above the name of the building in five columns, in alphabetical order, using the same allocation of colours.

**Opposite top:**
**Smith-Miller+Hawkinson, Barbara Kruger, Quennell Rothschild and Guy Nordenson, *Imperfect Utopia*, Raleigh, North Carolina.**

**Opposite bottom: Ilya Kabakov, *Antenna*, Münster, Germany.**




· CLARENCE J HALL · VICTOR W JONES · JOHN F KAZANOWSKI
· TOMAS C TUCKER · RODNEY C TURNER · ARIEL J SMITH · MICHAEL G BUCKMASTER
· DONALD H DWIGGINS Jr · MOSES B LUCAS · MICHAEL R ETHERIDGE · JOHN E GUROVICH
· ALLAN J EASTMAN · RICHARD S McFARLAND · IRA E McGOWAN · RONALD RODRIGUES
· JAMES J STROBLE · JIMMY W WILLEFORD · RUDY LEE BALDON · RICHARD L BARIGLIO
· ARTHUR J CASTILLO · DANIEL J DAVIDENKO · JAMES L FERRELL · ROBERT J FULLER
· VERNON G HOLBROOK · SCOTT W IGGULDEN · FRANK J LILLEY · JAMES J McMORROW
· EARL T PEARSON Jr · ROBERT P QUERY · ROBERT J SALISBURY · LESLIE F SHENK
· RAUL J VARGAS · PAUL B WOOLFORD · FRANKLIN E WRIGHT · ROBERT C BARR
· HARRY J JACKSON Jr · WILLIAM A BLACKBURN · WALTER G BURKHART · RUBEN J CARBAJAL
· JOHN K FOWLER · CARL F GOACHER · JOHN D HARRINGTON · MERLIN G BEER
· CHARLES J KEITT · CLEATUS P KIMBLE · RICHARD S LEACH · DENNIS P LINDSEY
· JOHN W MEADOWS · EDWARD W McCARTY · WILLIE E McINTOSH · MICHAEL P McQUEER
· DANIEL L SEEKFORD · ERNEST SERNA · ROGER A STEELE · ROGER L TALLMAN
· MICHAEL E YOUNG · KENNETH P BARKLEY Jr · JOHN M BELLAIRE · JON K BODAHL
· JEROME HIGGINS · D C CARTER · DANIEL CARTER Jr · KENNETH L CASWELL
· JAMES E DENNANY · RALPH E DIAS · ROBERT P GALLAGHER · DONALD W GILL Jr
· ROBERT B HAMBLETT · FREDDIE N HAYNES · GERALD R HELMICH · CARL HENDERSON
· THOMAS W LANDRUM · RONALD G LAUDERDALE · JOSEPH A LOFTON · GORDON W
· DANIEL F LYNCH Jr · LARRY C MOSHER · LIONEL E PARSONS · WILLIAM M PIERPONT
· DONALD O FONZI · MARK R ROSE · DENNIS W ROSS · WILLIAM SCOTT · HARRY W SMITH
· DENNIS E TIMMONS · ROBERT L TUCCI · BRUCE E WALTERS · NORMAN F BENEDIK
· JEFFREY L BOBULA · EDDIE D CARPENTER · RALPH R EVILSIZOR · RICHARD A FORBES
· EUGENE LENOIR · DENNIS E MILLIARD · JAMES M MOORE · JOHN M McLELLAN
RONALD E RAY · WILLIE G TURNER · STEVEN T SCHOOLER · STEVEN G SKELLY
· CYRIL H TOWNLEY · MICHAEL J ROBINSON · TERRY LEE ANDRESEN · DAVID P J BEDROSIAN
· MICHAEL J DALTON · GERALD R DASEN III · RONALD G DE WEESE · KENNETH G ELMORE
· JOHN W FRITTER · VICTOR M HAGLUND Jr · JOHN A HOWE · DANIEL L JURGENSEN
· JOHN E LEASURE · JAMES R LINDSAY · JOEL A MAY Jr · RICKEY JOE MEDLIN
· JAMES C RUMMERFIELD Jr · DENNIS L STEVENS · EDWARD E STUMP · THOMAS H SULLIVAN
· CARL A THOMPSON · OLIVER N THOMPSON · RUSSELL E UPRIGHT · JAMES R VAN HATTEM
· ARTHUR N WELCH · CHARLES R ALEX · DEE OKEY N CANADY · JAMES R CULWELL
· RALPH E FLOWERS Jr · ANTONIO MORILLIA FUENTES · JOHN G GRAF · ALLEN F GROTZKE
· JAMES J GUNDERSON · FOREST C HODGKIN · EVERETT R JORENS Jr · RICHARD T KASTNER
· WILLIAM D McGIVERN · CORDELL J PONAK · JOHN E POOLE · JOHN R RANKIN
· JOHN J ROBINSON · WALTER D ROMERO · BENEDICT J LINNEN III · DONALD L WILLIAMSON
· FRANCIS ZAVACKI · TERRY L ZUMALT · MARVIN R BERHOWE · MICHAEL L BILES
· GEORGE R FAZZAH · ERNEST D FORD · RONALD W IRELAND · ROBERT E KUS
· HENRY L LIMBACH · KENNETH D RANKIN
· ROBERT C SKINNER · JERRY D SMITH · WILLIAM J BROWN · MARK W BU
· ALLEN H CALDWELL · DAVID RIVAS · JOHN M CONE · GEORGE
· THOMAS L GRAVES · JAMES F POLUSNEY · JULIUS ZA
· CHARLES R PITTINGER · BRIAN L LO
· CLARENCE J HALL · VICTOR W JONES · JOHN F KAZANOWSKI
· ROBERT L SHEPPARD Jr · ROOSEVELT WALLACE · LOUIS B ALBERT Jr
· WILLIAM F DAVIS · CLAUDE E ELLARD Jr · JAMES L GASSELING
· JAMES O JACKSON · RONALD A KLINGMAN · RONALD H KNIGHT
· E MAY · ALEX R MOSHER · LESTER McCABE · LARRY RAY OWENS
· CHRISS L ROEDIGER · MAX E ROSEN · JOSEPH SLAVENSKY Jr
· ROBERT J WATKINS Jr · LAWRENCE D ACRE · GEORGE L AIKIN
· TERRY W BOOKER · JOHN P BRENNAN · EARL E CHARLES
· GEORGE A ELKINS · ROBERT FIELDS Jr · JAMES H GRAHAM
· HOWARD · DARRELL D IMBORNONE · CHARLES D JAGELER
· JOHN E LOPEZ Jr · ROBERT S MASON Jr · ROBERT R MILLER
· GREG B SCOTT · JAMES C SHIELDS · RICHARD A SMITH Sr
· RED K THORPE · LEON TRECINSKI · MARK A VAN BEUKERING
· ID H BENALLIE · THOMAS F BROWN Jr · CHARLES F BURRELL
· NKLIN J WEISNER · WILLIAM R GODFREY · DANNY R HESSON
· LBERT KETZLER Jr · MAURICE P KRAEMER Jr · STANLEY G KREBS
· AZARUS · CALVIN W MAXWELL · EUGENE J MORSE · TED PIERCE
· CONTRERAS SALINAS · HARRY C SHEPARD Jr · MANLEY E SILER Jr
· ROBERT FLORES Jr · MOSES L ALVES · ELLSWORTH S BRADFORD
· INGO BARBARA GARCIA · ALAN D GROOM · JOHN H HATHAWAY
· FRANK W KINKAID Jr · BERNARD R KNAPIC · MARVIN D LARSON
· OTHY R MIEDZIELEC · ABRAHAM L MOORE · DAVID L McCOMBS
· BYRN · WILLIAM ORTEGA Jr · JEROME J RICE · JOHN J W RODEN
· JAMES R DUFAULT · ROBERT C GREATHOUSE · ROBERT E JENRY
· NE M LENDERMAN · RICHARD J RINCK · RICHARD R STOLARUN
· QUILLO · JOHN T BAKER · JOHN W BROOKS · CHARLES B CAREY
· RONALD C EDWARDS · THOMAS A FRITZER Jr · JOHN K KRUEGER
· GARY L McCLOUD · DONALD R OSBORNE · KEITH A PATTERSON
· OLPH · WILLIAM S SHADE · JOHN M WHEELER · ERNEST B WHITE
· JOHN W BENNETT · DENNIS A BROWN · JIMMIE L CASTLEBERRY
· E Jr · LANNY M HAMBY · JERRELL R JONES · DAVID E KUCZYNSKI
· E · GEORGE P McCLINTIC · JAMES T SAVAGE · BURTON E SMALL
· D R WASHINGTON · GLENN WASHINGTON · MARK A BABSON Jr
· TERRY L BOOTH · EDWARD L BORREGO · FRANCIS P CREAMER
· MARKHAM · RAYMOND ORTIZ NOVOSOD · EDWARD E PIERCE
· L P SPEARS · DAVID J TRBOVICH · CLYDE W VAN VALKENBURG Jr
· OTH · JIMMIE D BROWN · PAUL E WALL · LAWRENCE L DWYER Jr
· EDWARD L GOODMAN · ROBERT F HEILIG Jr · JOSEPH HOLMES
· DENNIS M RATTIN · MICHAEL K SAWYER · ROBERT N DEMGEN
· ITTINGER · MICHAEL E COTES · MARCAS J GARCIA · ALAN T GEE
· TOPHER S STUEWE · LEONARD D COOPER · RALPH C
· BERT L LACOMBE · PAUL L MARCHANT · WI
· AREZ · JOHN H TAYLOR · WAYNE L ADK
· JAM L DAWES · GERALD J GUILLOR
· OUTHWICK · PETER J MOLDEN
· ROBERT L THANE · EDDIE LEE
· EARL · NORMAN E TH
· JOHNNY LEE BUR
· ANDREW G
· ROBERT J
· PAUL H


03
5
6
7
04
15
05
8
16
06
9
17
07
10
7
28
18
08
29
19
09
30
20
40
31
21
41
32
42
33
43
34
52
44
53
45
54
46
55
47

Another kind of typographical installation links our perception of the letters with movement. Examples are the works by Maarten de Reus in Carnisselande and Caruso St John in London. Maarten de Reus's installation consists of five enormous letters set up in the centre of a roundabout. As Baines and Dixon say, '*G.R.O.E.N.* cannot be read from any one point but is a "drive-by art piece" which upon first acquaintance needs to be spelt out letter by letter as a child would read.'[3] Reading depends here on the driver's progress around the roundabout. One of the typographic fences designed by Caruso St John bears the word 'Bankside' painted on metal mesh. Peter St John explains, 'The holes in the fencing are so big that you can only read the letters clearly when you look at the sign obliquely, so that it seems to disappear as you walk past it.'[4]

In other cases, the relationship with the installation is based on touch, as with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, designed by architect Maya Lin. Many people touch the inscribed name of a relative who died in the war as if to stay in contact with the actual person. This experience may prompt visitors to record the sensation more permanently: a sheet of paper and a pencil are all that is needed to take a rubbing of the loved one's name. It is not known whether this practice was suggested by the architect herself, by the foundation that looks after the memorial or if it came about spontaneously. What is clear is that today sheets of paper supplied by the Veterans Memorial Fund are handed out to visitors so that they can make rubbings. If anyone is unable to do it themselves, the Fund will make a rubbing and send it to them. Another example of an installation that refers to touch is Anton Parsons's *Invisible City*, in which the artist uses Braille, enlarged and therefore unreadable, as an invitation to an exploration extending beyond vision. Sometimes the local citizens become so attached to a work that they put pressure on the local authorities to ensure its future. This was the case with Robert Indiana's sculpture *LOVE*, now returned to Philadelphia thanks to the campaign organized by its citizens. Another example with a happy ending is that of FA+'s *Citat*, initially conceived as a temporary inscription painted on the asphalt of a Stockholm street, but which became so popular that the people the city asked to have it made permanent.

An installation can also court negative reactions, as in the case of *The Cursing Stone and Reiver Pavement* designed by Gordon Young with Why Not Associates, which gave rise to something of a furore. Inscribed with a famous curse, the stone has been seen by some as bringing bad luck on the inhabitants of the area. Attempts were even made to have it destroyed but, despite protests, the stone remains in its original position.

**The Authors**

The designers of the installations considered here differ greatly in their disciplines and professional backgrounds. They include graphic designers, artists, architects and stone-carvers. Different areas often overlap, leading to fruitful collaborations. There are two important examples of this: *Imperfect Utopia*, which came from a collaboration between architects Smith-Miller+Hawkinson, artist Barbara Kruger, landscape architects Quennell Rothschild and structural engineer Guy Nordenson; and the installations executed by the artist Gordon Young with the Why Not Associates group of graphic designers.

There are other professionals whose training does not preclude an interest in and knowledge of other disciplines. One of these is letter-carver Richard Kindersley: 'I work closely with architects developing lettering schemes and was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Institute of British Architecture for my work in this area. I also undertake work in the graphic design field, and I have collaborated with people like Alan Fletcher and others,' he says.[5]

The architects of Caruso St John collaborate with graphic designers and outside artists. As Peter St John says, 'We sometimes use graphic designers, although we didn't

**Opposite top: Maya Lin, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington DC.**

**Opposite bottom: Rudolph de Harak, digital clock, New York City.**


LINFORD · ANNABELLE MUMBY (7)
SALLY ROE · ROSEMARY PERKINS
CALVERT · JAMES FOSTER · IMOGEN HILL
ED BEAUMONT · BRIAN BEST · JOYCE BEST
AIR SMITH · ALEX MORTON FLETCHER
ETCHER · FREDERICK ROTHWELL
JULIA · CHARLOTTE PETTERSON
SHEPHERD · CHARLOTTE DANIELS
ESTWELL · JEAN PATRICIA SMITH
WALTON · MARY BENNETT
TH OUGHTBRIDGE · SAM CLEGG
EEN · CATHERINE WILDING
OHERTY · JULIE
WLS ·


BANKSIDE

on this project [Bankside Signage System]. Here the graphic part was an integral part of our design. We worked with an artist (Roy Voss) at first, to develop the concept. We tend to do this a lot.'[6]

**Three-dimensional Graphics and Manufacturing Techniques**

In typographic installations, as opposed to printed works, letters do not lie on the static space of a page. They inhabit a dynamic space where people live and life flows. Letters thus acquire new characteristics, such as texture and volume, in a way that is much more obvious than in printed letters.

There are many ways in which typographic installations can integrate letters with space, ranging from a more or less two-dimensional letter on a surface to one that is fully three-dimensional and free-standing like a statue. Expressive inspiration, construction techniques and a variety of materials each have a role to play. Examples of installations exploiting two-dimensionality include Estudio SIC & Buj+Colón's Monument to the Victims of 11 March 2004, with its letters printed on a thin and almost invisible ETFE membrane suspended within the glass dome; Karel Martens's work for Veenman printers, in which a poem is reproduced on the external glass panes using a screen-printing technique; and Paula Scher / Pentagram's work for the New Jersey Performing Arts Center / Lucent Technologies Center for Arts Education (NJPAC), in which repeated words on the external walls are simply painted on. It has always been the case that the most widespread and immediate method for writing on a building is by painting, despite the need for periodic restoration to keep it in good condition. The great virtue of painted letters lies in their readability. According to Peter St John, 'A painted word always has a better chance of being legible from an acute angle than most constructed or modelled characters. Nineteenth-century sign painters got the best of both worlds by giving their letters pretend returns and shadows, so that they were enriched without loss of legibility.'[6]

But there are also cases where the letters begin to take on a perceptible thickness, revealing not only a frontal dimension but also a side dimension. An example is Lawrence Weiner's *NYC Manhole Covers*, in which the cast design stands out in light relief. This makes it possible both to step on them and to read them. As letter thickness increases, we need to take into consideration the letter's section and the shadow it casts. One material that lends itself to imprinting with a stamp is concrete, a technique of which Catherine Griffiths made extensive use in her Wellington Writers Walk, and that was also used by BBPR for the steles in the courtyard of the Museum-Monument to the Deportee for Political and Racial Reasons. As the letters become thicker, the role of light in augmenting the appearance of volume becomes increasingly important. This is the case with Joan Brossa's *Visual Poem for a Facade*, where the plastic letters are placed so as to stand away from the building and create a shadow that emphasizes their three-dimensional appearance. Pierre di Sciullo's external installation for the National Dance Centre is another three-dimensional piece of lettering; erected on the roof of the building, at night it is transformed into neon writing.

Some works use letters, neither entirely two-dimensional nor three-dimensional, that become almost an integral part of the construction. One example is Cardozo Kindersley Workshop's British Library Gates, which consist of the repeated words 'British Library' extending to a height of 4 metres (13 feet); the depth of the letters is not immediately apparent.

Sometimes a typographical installation has no physical link with the building. Where there is a logical link with the architecture, there arises what has been described by Jock Kinneir as 'a state of happy coexistence in which two very different partners maintain their integrity'.[7] A good example is Chermayeff & Geismar's *9 West 57th Street*, where

**Opposite top: Gordon Young with Why Not Associates, *Walk of Art*, Wakefield, West Yorkshire, UK.**

**Opposite bottom: Caruso St John, Bankside Signage System, London.**

the enormous '9', the street number of the neighbouring skyscraper, can be explored from all sides. *M,* designed by Roberto Behar & Rosario Marquardt / R & R Studios, stands alone in front of the entrance to the Metro station on the Miami Riverwalk. Its link with the station is established by fact that *M* stands for Metro, and because travellers wishing to enter the station must pass through the legs of the *M*.

There are also installations in which the letters become entirely autonomous, existing without reference to any surrounding architecture. *Bàrcino* is a work by Joan Brossa in Barcelona, in which the name of the ancient Roman city is rendered in seven different sculptures, one for each letter of the word. Maarten de Reus's *G.R.O.E.N.* is similarly an installation consisting of five different letters, while Robert Indiana's *LOVE* is a sculpture made up of a group of interlinked letters, composed in an arrangement that makes the sculpture unique.

In the examples seen so far, the three-dimensional appearance of the letters is achieved by adding material. But it can also be achieved by subtraction, for example, by carving or inscribing. Inscriptions can be characterized by the material used and the type of section chosen; the section can be V-sunk, as in most Roman inscriptions, though square sinkages are sometimes used for greater emphasis. Richard Kindersley's installation at Canning Town Underground Station in London is unusual as he has chosen to use concrete, a particularly difficult material to work with, for his carved inscriptions. In contrast, Maya Lin used an automated technique, photo-stencil gritblasting, to inscribe the names – more than 50,000 in number – on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Another subtractive technique is to cut out the letters from the background material. An example is *Walk of Art*, designed by Gordon Young with Why Not Associates, where the names of donors are formed by piercing the metal plates that form the walkway. Similarly, in Attila F. Kovács's work for the House of Terror Museum, the letters of the word 'TERROR' are created by piercing the metal. These cast shadows on the facade, the pavement and the street, perhaps to suggest the immateriality of the spectre of fear.

### Letters, Words and Texts

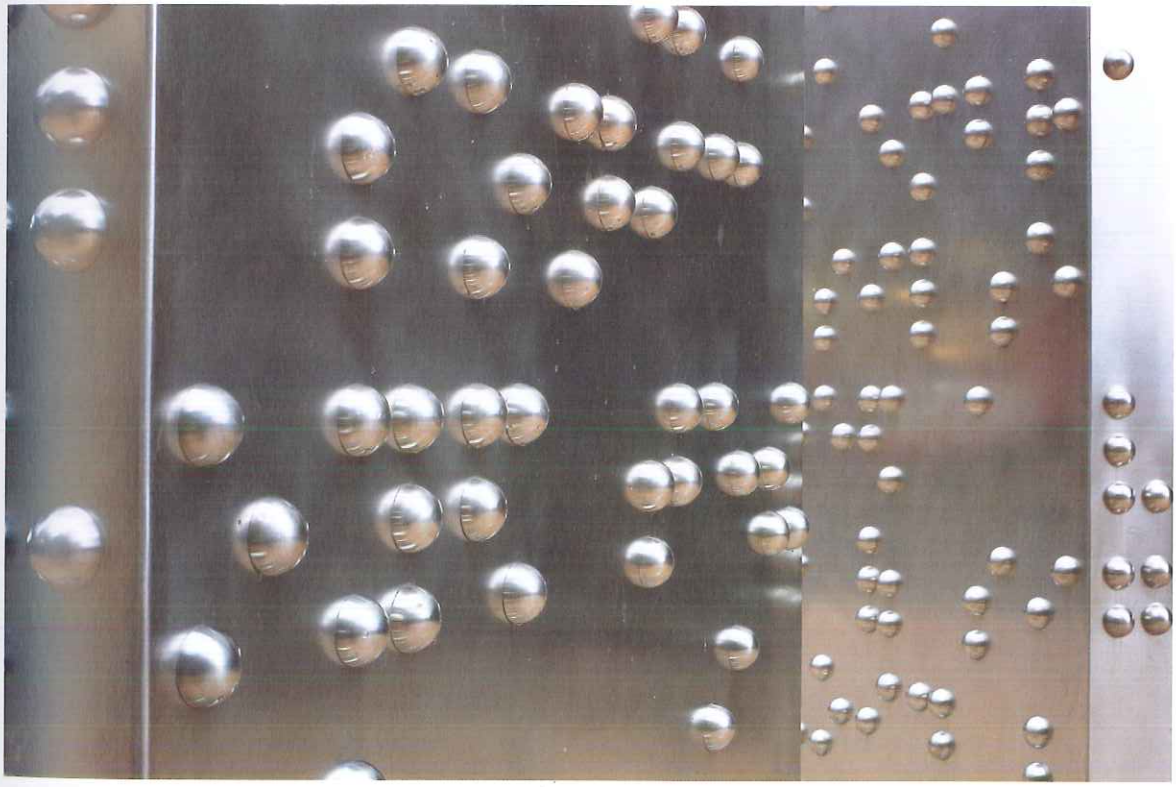
The installations discussed here all relate to the world of letters, but each in a different way. First, there are quantitative differences between them. Some works are composed of a single letter (Brossa's *Transitable Visual Poem* and René Knip's *ABC on the Hoofdweg*), others of a single word (Robert Indiana's *LOVE*, Maarten de Reus's *G.R.O.E.N.* and Pierre di Sciullo's National Dance Centre). Some feature lists of words (*Walk of Art* by Gordon Young with Why Not Associates and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by Maya Lin), repeated words (Paula Scher / Pentagram's NJPAC and Cardozo Kindersley Workshop's British Library Gates) or whole texts (Karel Martens's exterior for Veenman printers and Catherine Griffiths's Wellington Writers Walk).

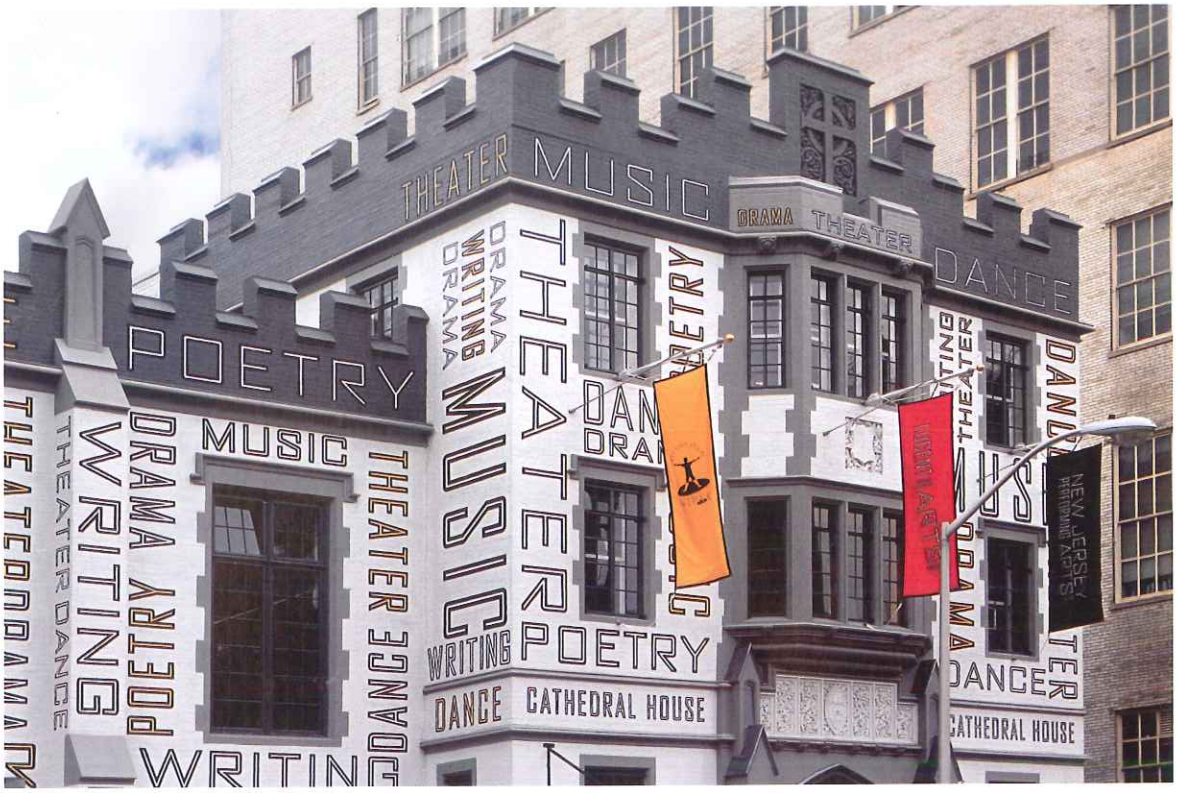
The choice to use one or more letters or words, and the judgement of the balance between content and form, text and image, depend on the message that the creator of the work wishes to communicate. Where a single letter or number is used, as in Chermayeff & Geismar's *9 West 57th Street*, the installation becomes a sculpture in which our understanding of the sign seems almost secondary in importance. It is as if we could abstract the meaning of that particular installation to a point where, paradoxically (because very often these are the larger installations), its meaning resides not so much in what the letter signifies as in the composition as a whole.

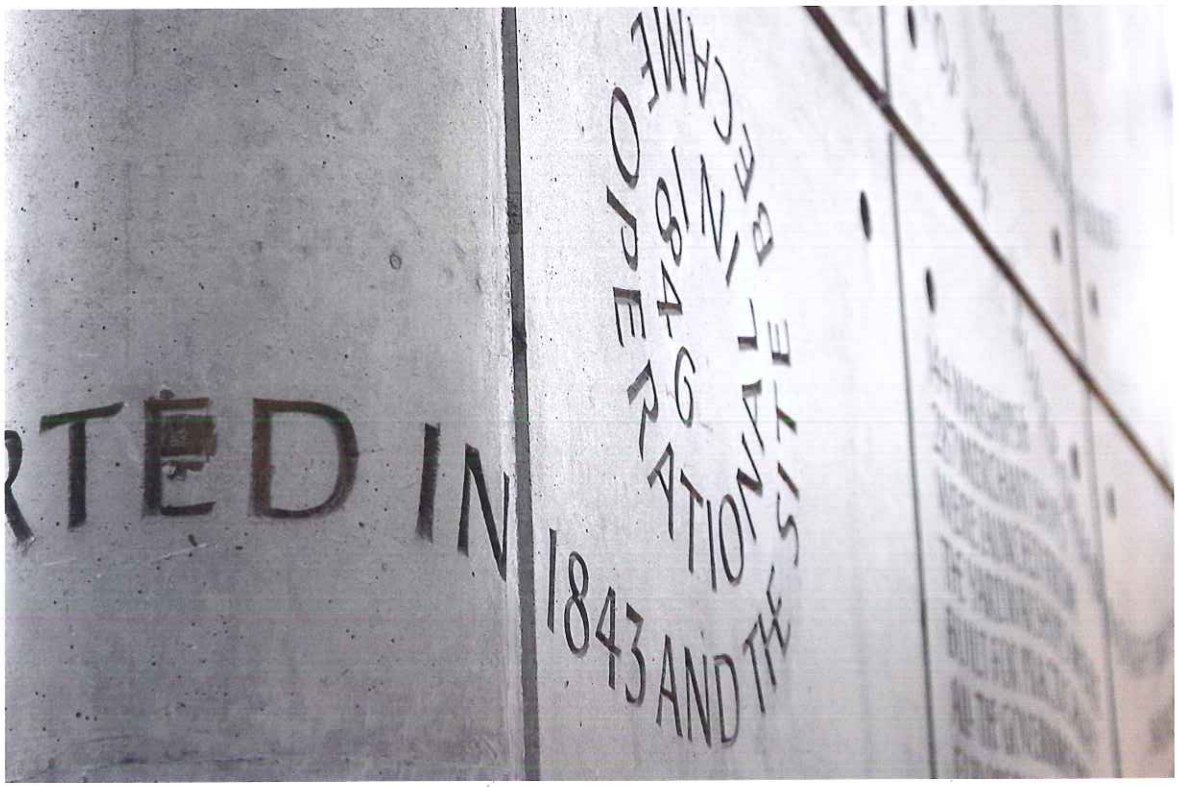
Although all installations must address more or less explicitly the relationship between form and meaning, there are some that are particularly symbolic in approach. In the case of texts, it is usually important that they are legible as, for example, those

**Opposite top: Karel Martens, facade for Veenman printers, Ede, the Netherlands.**

**Opposite bottom: Anton Parsons, *Invisible City*, Wellington, New Zealand.**




THEATER
MUSIC
DRAMA THEATER
DANCE
POETRY
DRAMA WRITING DRAMA
THEATER
MUSIC
WRITING
POETRY
DANCE
CATHEDRAL HOUSE
MUSIC
DRAMA POETRY WRITING
THEATER DANCE
DANCE CATHEDRAL HOUSE
NEW JERSEY PERFORMING ARTS


RTED IN
1843 AND THE SITE
OPERATIONAL BE
CAME

on the Wellington Writers Walk designed by Catherine Griffiths, which is covered with quotations from local authors. This means that the design of the letterform must also be legible in relation to the materials, techniques and colours chosen.

An interesting example is Karel Martens's work for the Veenman printers' building, where the letterforms are very legible but the text itself less so: K. Schippers's poem is broken down into letters arranged according to a geometric grill pattern on the facade, making it unreadable.

Where the text consists of a list – a situation typical of, but not limited to, memorials – it is the very repetition of words that can become the starting point for interesting and evocative compositions that are anything but boringly repetitive. Very often, the emphasis is placed on the number of names, giving visitors a sense of the extent of the tragedy and arousing their empathy. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a striking example, listing the names of 58,195 victims of the Vietnam War on a long black granite wall. Here it is possible both to find the precise position of an individual name and, at the same time, to be struck by the dramatic immensity of the whole. While at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial each name has its precise location on the installation, the architects of the Museum-Monument to the Deportee for Political and Racial Reasons, BBPR, have sought to create a more general effect. The interior of the last room of the museum is entirely covered by the names of the victims. In this case, however, the list is not exhaustive. Only some of the names are recorded, since the intention is not to focus on the individual but to overwhelm the visitor with an overall impression. The names appear everywhere: on walls, ceilings, vaults, columns and even doors and window surrounds. Some names stand for others, as in the case of Anne Frank, whose name symbolically represents all the children who lost their lives during the deportations. Hidden among the letters are acrostics, including 'Bruno Losi', the name of the mayor who strongly pushed for the building of the museum, and 'Cooperativa Muratori e Braccianti di Carpi', the name of the building company that carried out the work.

In *Walk of Art* by Gordon Young with Why Not Associates, a typographical walkway bears the incised names of supporters who campaigned to raise money for the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, both to thank the donors and to encourage others to give.

**Type and Lettering**

The installations use a wide variety of letterforms, chosen according to the type of work, the requirements of the commission, the characteristics of the materials used and, not least, the personalities of the creators who, through their professional training, will inevitably relate in different ways to the world of typography.

There is a crucial difference between type and lettering. As Baines and Dixon explain, 'Put very simply, type is an industrial product capable of duplication and automation, while lettering is a one-off, created for a specific purpose and capable of responding to the demands of scale, material and surroundings in quite a different way.'[8]

The following are only some of the very many examples of typographical letterforms used in these installations: Akzidenz Grotesk for Rudolph de Harak's digital clock and for Caruso St John's Bankside Signage System; Helvetica for *Citat* by FA+; Optima for Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial; Helvetica with Optima for the Wellington Writers Walk by Catherine Griffiths; Univers for Joan Brossa's *Visual Poem for a Facade*; Agency Gothic for NJPAC by Paula Scher; and the letterforms designed by Eric Gill, favoured by Why Not Associates.

By contrast, Richard Kindersley's lettering for Canning Town Underground was designed especially for this project. Deriving from calligraphy, the letters are carved individually, with no two exactly the same. Maarten de Reus designed only the five

**Opposite top: Paula Scher / Pentagram, New Jersey Performing Arts Center, Newark, New Jersey.**

**Opposite bottom: Richard Kindersley, Canning Town Underground, London.**

characters making up the word *G.R.O.E.N*, further letters being unnecessary. It is possible to see three different types of lettering at the Museum-Monument to the Deportee for Political and Racial Reasons. There is little information at the museum about the lettering, which does not seem to be based on any preexisting characters. It is probable that the lettering was done by the workers themselves without a systematic design but with sensitivity and a good sense of composition. Other designers have taken existing typographical characters and modified them. Lawrence Weiner, both for *A Translation from One Language to Another* and for *NYC Manhole Covers*, bases his letters on Franklin Gothic; Pierre di Sciullo's letters for the National Dance Centre are based on his own Minimum Sol; for *Nearamnew* Paul Carter reworks Meta; the letterforms of Robert Indiana's *LOVE* seem to have been inspired by Clarendon.

**Type, Lettering and Art: The Debate**

Many scholars, such as Nicolete Gray, Phil Baines and Walter Tracy, have discussed the use of types and lettering in public places, raising the question of the kind of training necessary to carry out these kinds of projects. In their view, the use of typefaces on buildings by professionals with little specific training often creates unpleasant results, which can debase the architecture itself and diminish its impact on the landscape. In their view, a public lettering is meant to be read. It must not, then, be ephemeral and it must be subject to rigorous study. Tracy sets out three critiques for the use of types in publicly displayed writing. The first concerns their two-dimensionality: types are designed to be printed, so they should be flat. The second relates to size: types are created to be printed to a certain size, definitely smaller than that of a sign. The third deals with their historical connotations: a typeface, particularly in its detail, inevitably reveals the period in which it was created and the techniques used. Tracy calls on architects to treat lettering with the same seriousness and rigour as other aspects of architecture. 'It is the architect, though, who in this, as in other contemporary matters, ought to take a positive line. His new factories, offices and flats are transforming so much the scenery that he ought to signify them in something more appropriate than printer's type; ought, in fact, to recognize with gratitude that original lettering may be a small but useful means of adding a visible touch of humanity to the growing rectangularities of the urban landscape.'[9]

Tracy continues: 'The better course is to find a designer with real ability in *creative* lettering (a few typographers may have it), give him a detailed view of the problem and demand a design which is original, distinctive, permanently attractive, and as true to that particular building as any other detail.'[10] It is these considerations that highlight the need for a specific professional training for those wishing to work in the area of public lettering. As Baines and Dixon argue, 'Ironically, while letters may surround us, nowhere is the subject of environmental lettering taught. Its broad nature means that it is spread too thinly across too many different courses, each with other teaching priorities. In the case of graphic design, a growing emphasis on the typography has meant that the teaching of the more fluid subject of lettering has all but been abandoned. This, and the ability of contemporary production methods to generate types at any size on virtually any substrate, tends to blind us to the important differences between lettering and type.'[11]

This debate, initiated in 1960 by Nicolete Gray, is still of great significance today, as it encourages us to take public lettering and its particular requirements seriously.

**Notes**

[1] Jock Kinneir, *Words and Buildings: The Art and Practice of Public Lettering,* The Architectural Press, London, 1980, p. 72.

[2] Phil Baines and Catherine Dixon, *Signs: Lettering in the Environment,* Laurence King, London, 2003, p. 7.

[3] Ibid., p. 160.

[4] Interview with Peter St John, 20 October 2011.

[5] Interview with Richard Kindersley, 21 October 2011.

[6] Interview with Peter St John, 20 October 2011.

[7] Jock Kinneir, *Words and Buildings*, p. 74.

[8] Baines and Dixon, *Signs*, p. 8.

[9] Walter Tracy, 'Typography on Buildings', *Motif*, no. 4, Shenval Press, London, 1960, p. 86.

[10] Ibid., pp. 84–85.

[11] Baines and Dixon, *Signs*, pp. 7–8.