

# Expressing Art

Navigating the befuddling world of contemporary art terms.

By Joel Groover

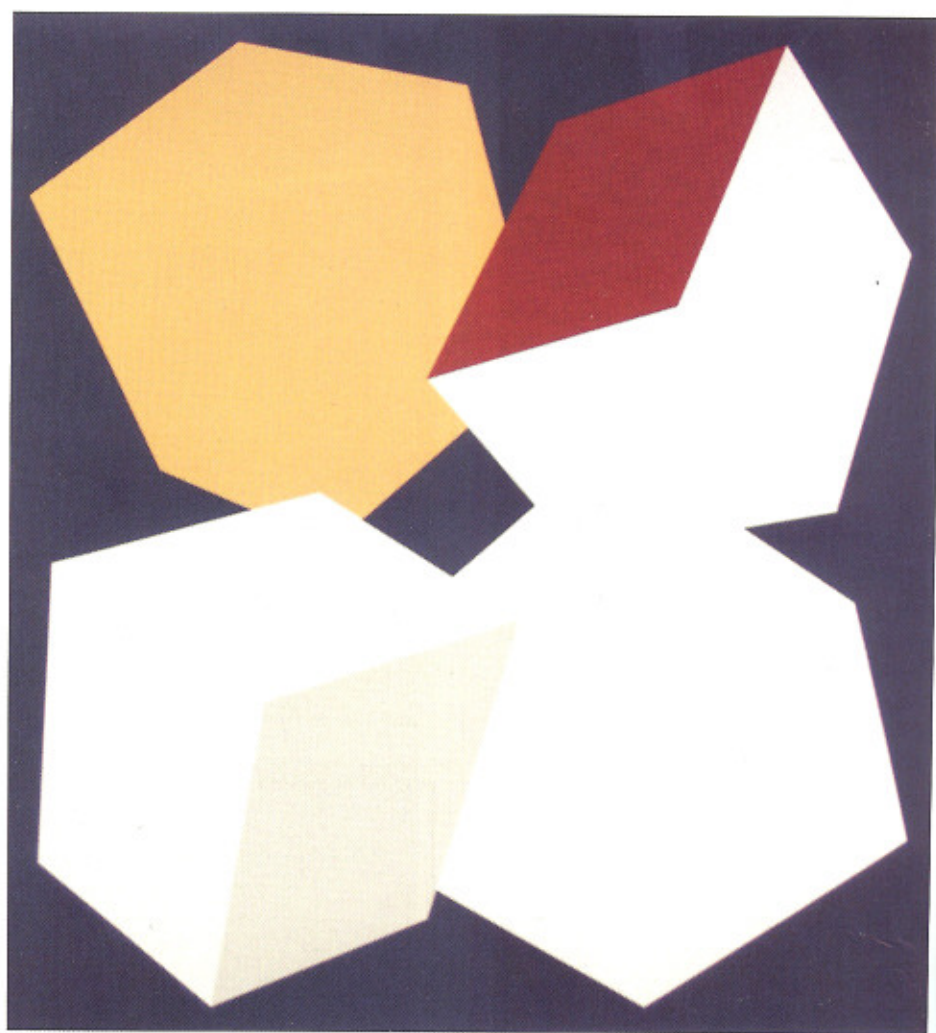
**T**he Museum of Modern Art once put its own spin on the quiz show "Jeopardy." Art educators culled 17 words from a wall label for a Jasper Johns print and then asked visitors to use each in a sentence. "The number that knew this vocabulary was tiny," recalls Philip Yenawine, director of education from 1983 to 1993, "and these were *MoMA* audiences."

At one time or another, most contemporary art aficionados have been befuddled by the esoteric ramblings of critic or curator, or stupefied by an art term absent from the weightiest of dictionaries. "Iconophor?" "Electrography?" "Tubimangulate?" The evolving lexicon of contemporary art can make even erudite readers feel like pawns in an unending logomachy (war of words).

And yet, having a solid grasp of key terms can make reading and conversing about contemporary art easier and more rewarding. Fortunately, a growing body of print and online resources now exists to help diligent wordsmiths.

## BEWARE OF BLUSTER

Science and medical writers do their best to simplify and explain, but even in



the popular press much of the writing about contemporary art is, in a word, periphrastic (verbose and circumlocutory). Yenawine, who develops art curricula as co-director of New York-based Visual Understanding in Education, finds this particularly irksome. "Of all the writing that attempts to reach a broader public, art writing is the worst," he says. "I think art writers often obfuscate because they don't actually understand what they're looking at." Yenawine, author of *Key Art Terms for Beginners* (Harry N. Abrams, 1995), urges art-lovers to hone their sense of skepticism. If that catalog or exhibition review contains too many words like "periphrastic," consider putting it down or picking up another source.

*Richard Solomon, president of Pace Prints, New York, says that in "Untitled," 1976, silk-screen with embossing, Charles Hinman "created the illusion of three dimensions by embossing the screenprinted images and thereby was able in the print medium to achieve visual effects that were similar to his shaped canvas paintings."*

## LEGITIMATE LINGO

Nonetheless, a certain amount of terminology is inevitable in discussions of more recent art. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, bursts of extraordinary artistic innovation periodically sprouted whole crops of new words (often ending in "ism"). Then, in the 1960s and '70s, an explosion of radical



new ideas about art, as well as wholesale borrowing of theoretical terminology from other disciplines, kicked this process into overdrive. Tenured professors and novice collectors alike scrambled to keep up. "We're still struggling with this,"

notes Thomas Patin, professor of art history at Ohio University. "You've really got to dive in to grasp it all." Patin's *Artwords* (Greenwood Press, 1997) is a good start—a 176-page volume that is the first reference book to focus on

## Dorsey McHugh



Poetry in Life

Acrylic on board

36" x 36"

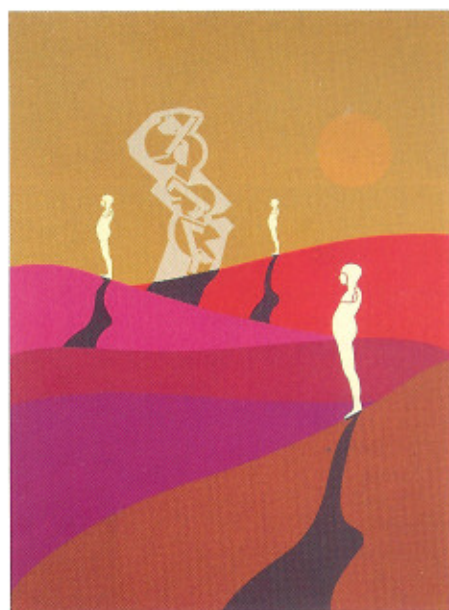
*Dorsey McHugh's artistic philosophy lies in her favorite quotation: "Look to the light and the shadows will fall behind".*

Each time Dorsey creates a painting, she combines technique, color selection, and subject matter to create images which remind us to focus on the warmer side of life. Her landscapes are portals for respite offering passage into a realm we remember but perhaps have left behind.

**DORSEY McHUGH FINE ART**

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*Ernest Trova's "Untitled" (from "Series Seventy-Five"), 1975, color silkscreen, depicts a "figure that is repetitively used in the perspective of a landscape to create a strong, colorful image," notes Solomon. "Also it is an excellent representation of his two-dimensional use of his signature sculptural form."*

theoretical terminology in contemporary art. It contains nearly 400 recently introduced terms and phrases.

Both Patin and Yenawine also recommend Robert Atkins' *ArtSpeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present* (Abbeville Press, 1997). This nearly 120-entry dictionary defines major art terms since 1945.

### DOUBLE MEANINGS

Anne K. Swartz, professor of art history at Georgia's Savannah College of Art & Design, says terms like "Modernism" and "Postmodernism" typify one of contemporary art's main obstacles to clarity: Some terms mean different things to different people. Her explanation to her students is: "In Modernism, the emphasis is on the product, with the artist as a hero. With Postmodernism, the emphasis is on the process, with the artist as a facilitator."

Patin's pet peeve is the word "deconstruction." To him, it refers to the school of criticism created by French philosopher Jacques Derrida or Derrida's method for reading texts. "People tend to use it as a synonym for analysis, but that's not it at all," Patin says.



### MEDIA MATTERS

Patin's point is that meaning emerges through consensus. Consensus, however, takes time to develop, and in contemporary art the jury is still out on dozens of new words. Swartz, who is working on a book about new artistic media, runs into this continually. "Some people refer to technology and art as 'new media,' some as 'media art' and others as 'new genres,'" she says. "They all mean the same thing."

Indeed, art's technological front is a veritable cornucopia of tricky terms, from "electrography" (making art with a copy machine) to "telematic art" (using online computer networks as a medium). "This is all very much like it was at the time of the birth of cinema, when there were all these competing terms that finally stabilized," notes Roger Malina, executive editor of *Leonardo*, the journal of San Francisco-based Leonardo/The International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology. *Leonardo* periodically publishes excerpts from an evolving French dictionary that has already defined more than 2,000 technology-related art terms.

### ONLINE HELP

Despite its pitfalls, the Internet can be a useful resource. The most popular free online art dictionary may be Art lex.com, which defines some 3,600 terms. Its founder, art teacher Michael Delahunt of Scottsdale, Arizona, delights in hunting down obscure gems like "iconophor" (an image whose first distinctive feature consists of the letter that begins the name of its referent). For fun, he also has a few neologisms of his own, including "tubimangulate" (to squeeze a tube of paint or other material in an especially sloppy way).

### GALLERY GUIDES

Richard Solomon, president of the Art Dealers Association of America (ADAA) and Pace Prints, a Manhattan-based contemporary art gallery, suggests that collectors rely on galleries for help. Gallery owners know the terminology. Some, including ADAA, even publish glossaries.

### TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

For Yenawine, art vocabulary is a double-edged sword. He says erudition—or the lack of it—should never unduly influence our personal encounters with art. "Knowing the lingo is in some ways

the last step in dealing with contemporary art," he says. "The real source of interest and meaning is the art itself." □

*Joel Groover is the former Senior Editor of Art & Antiques.*



"Ice House Dungeness" Oil on linen 20" x 24" ©West Fraser 2004

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