

A CLEAR VISION OF PRESIDENTS' MESSAGES

Eye-chart art display illustrates leaders' most-used words

By Teresa Annas
The Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK

R. Luke DuBois figured out a way to test the vision of America's presidents.

His method involved reading all of their State of the Union addresses and running those speeches through a computer program. He came up with each president's most-used words, then arranged them like a Snellen eye chart.

Those are the charts that have giant letters at the top, with the type size decreasing on each descending line.

The result is a conceptual art installation DuBois titled "Hindsight Is Always 20/20." The Chrysler Museum of Art recently bought a set of his letterpress prints, now on display.

"Here's a guy who managed to cram over 200 years of American history into 41 panels," said museum director Bill Hennessey. "Each one is a perfect snapshot of the preoccupations of our nation at a specific moment in history. Oh, and we have an inauguration

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coming up."

DuBois, who lives in New York, began plotting the project in 2006.

"I knew I wanted to do a big piece for the election," he said this week from his office at the Polytechnic Institute at New York University in Brooklyn, where he teaches at an experimental media center.

Earlier works from DuBois, 33, also used his own computer software. In 2006, he took

all of the Billboard No. 1 hits from 1958 to 2000 and digitally analyzed all 850 or so songs, coming up with a "spectral average" for each song.

The resulting 37-minute piece sounds like a machine idling in outer space, shifting from one extended tone to another. "I call it time-lapse phonography," he said.

Around the same time, he compressed 75 years of Academy Awards best pictures into one minute per film. That piece, called "Academy," was featured at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival.

He found the form for "Hindsight" as he watched James Carville, the Democratic political strategist, on television. He had been contemplating a project using presidential speeches.

Carville said something like, "The problem with those guys, none of them have vision," DuBois recalled. "He kept using that word. And I thought, 'Oh. Vision: You make an eye chart. That's how you test someone's vision.'"

Eye charts contain 66 letters, so DuBois determined the top 66 words for each president, after taking out common words such as "and," "the" and "with." Each president has a unique set of words, he said. No repeats on any of the charts.

George Washington's big word was "gentlemen."

James Madison's was "enemy."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt uttered "democratic" most often.

George W. Bush's No. 1 word was "terror."

Hoover's top word was "unemployment" because the Depression kicked in on his watch.

DuBois only made 41 charts, he said, because two presidents died before giving their first State of the Union

speech.

Through the years, presidential language became more everyday.

"Jimmy Carter is the epitome of it," DuBois said. "His No. 1 word is 'us.' He talks in the plural like he's a preacher. He delivered his State of the Union address in plural and was the only one who did it."

His favorite eye chart is based on Lyndon Baines Johnson. "Tonight" was his big word.

"He had to give the first prime-time television address, so he began almost every sentence with 'tonight.'"

DuBois found all the speeches on a Web site for The American Presidency Project, a vast resource of presidential information based at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Barack Obama's first speech to Congress as president has not been announced, said Kimber

ly Hunter, press secretary to Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va. If recent presidents are any gauge, Obama will give his first address in February but it will not be a State of the Union address, she said.

A State of the Union speech relates to a president's previous year in office, she said.

DuBois said he had no idea what Obama's big word would become. While campaigning, he used the word "change" a lot.

"Once you're president, you can't be talking about change. You are the change," DuBois said.

He initially got interested in the address as an expression of a "power relationship."

"The president has to make himself accountable to Congress. In the United States, Congress is sovereign. It's we the people, not I the president, who are in charge."

He made "Hindsight," in part, as a reaction to the Bush administration, which he de-



scribed as approaching "an imperial presidency."

"A lot of the steps the president took in the war on terror and the way in which industry was dealt with in deregulation," he said, were done by the executive branch without Congress' consent.

"Not that I know this stuff: I'm just an artist."

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if you go

What "Hindsight Is Always 20/20," a conceptual art installation by R. Luke DuBois

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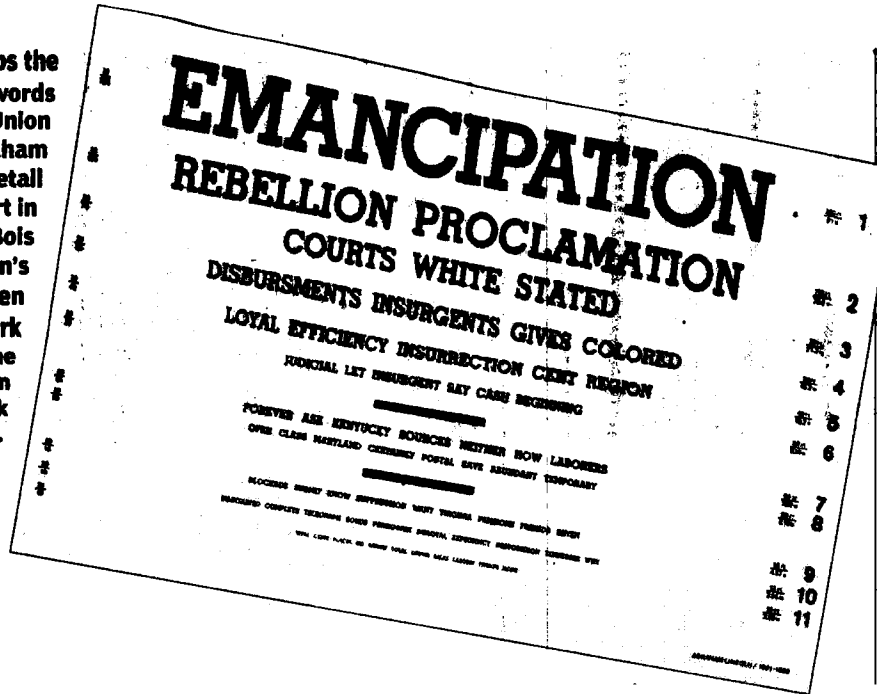
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"Emancipation" tops the list of most-used words in a State of the Union address by Abraham Lincoln in this detail from a piece of art in which R. Luke DuBois arranged Lincoln's words like a Snellen eye chart. His work is on display at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk through March 15.

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