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ART & TEXT IN CHICAGO



CONTEXTUAL

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APRIL 14 - JUNE 17, 2001
CHICAGO CULTURAL CENTER

Edith Altman

Kristin Avery

Mark Booth

Adam Brooks

Stephanie Brooks

M. W. Burns

Jane Calvin

Max King Cap

Mary Dritschel

Carol Jackson

Stephen Lapthisophon

Christine LoFaso

Lou Mallozzi

Helen Mirra

Karen Reimer

Ellen Rothenberg

Curated by Lanny Silverman

My first awareness of Chicago art was as an outsider. I distinctly remember going to a New York gallery—must have been Phyllis Kind—in the 1970s and stating that the work displayed there looked like it was from Chicago, then being complimented for my acumen. This *rara avis* was suggested by what I characterized as a look of “raw id,” a rude and crude blast of energy expressed in figurative work that combined high and low cultural references with reckless abandon.

Unfortunately, in the world outside Chicago, and to some extent even within, this characterization has stuck and become limiting; like a character actor Chicago art has been type-cast. Chicago always has had a wider range of art production, and this exhibition aims to alleviate previous misrepresentation by showcasing a variety of largely conceptual and text-based art that flourishes in the City of Big Shoulders. Of course, this exhibition highlights only one more facet of the big picture, offering an overview, by no means exhaustive, of the genre.

I’ve selected what I hope is a representative sampling of text-based artists in Chicago, from those just out of school to artists with thirty years of exhibition history. In some cases artists are represented by a single installation, in others by examples of a larger oeuvre. An important determinant in selecting work was that text be an essential carrier of content, as opposed to an addendum or explanatory addition. Also, I tried to include work in a variety of mediums and especially work in which text is embodied in seductive objects, knowing full well that many viewers strongly resist the notion of text and art coexisting.

A few words are in order about what has not been included. Despite my longstanding interest in artists’ books, I felt that this is a genre unto itself, posing additional challenges of accessibility when on display. Chicago is also a vibrant center of production of underground comics and graphic novels, but, again, this could well be the focus of an entire exhibition.

As two forms of expressive language, it is only natural that the visual and the verbal should conjoin. Even the earliest extant forms of art, such as cave drawings in Lascaux, France, are best understood as an attempt to communicate information in an amalgamated visual/verbal form. The conjunction of art and text is common in today’s art, and has been since the birth of modernism, as is evident in Picasso’s and Braque’s insertion of newspaper clippings into their synthetic cubist paintings of 1912. Verbal and visual expression had been commingling for centuries—from pictographic inscriptions in Egyptian pyramids to medieval illuminated manuscripts to the political caricatures of

Daumier. Nonetheless, the burgeoning of conceptual art, Fluxus, and correspondence art in the 1960s and 1970s markedly expanded the possibilities for the incorporation of ideas and textual expression in visual art. This expansion continues up to the art of the moment, in which the very boundaries of what is art are in question. It is my belief that the best art integrates emotional, intellectual, and sensual aspects, and hopefully this exhibition affords many rich examples.

This exhibition and catalog are the result of the efforts of many individuals, and of collaborations which have made the whole greater than the sum of its parts. I'd first like to thank the artists, many of whom worked with onerous restraints of budget and time to produce works especially for this exhibition and uniquely suited to our space. In a sense they were collaborations with the curator and our institution as well. I'd especially like to thank *WhiteWalks*, in particular, its editor, Anthony Elms, and Joel Score, a member of the editorial board. Anthony's enthusiasm for this project made this catalog a possibility, and his hard work helped make it a reality. Lou Mallozzi of Experimental Sound Studios, in addition to his role as an artist in "Con/textual," graciously volunteered his production facilities and expertise as a producer to make possible the CD audio documentation in this catalog. It was a pleasure renewing a working relationship with Buzz Spector, whose insightful essay is an important part of this project. Thanks are also extended to Steve Anderson and Elizabeth Mayer for their skillful design of the catalog, and for their patience, and to Petersen Graphics Group for its careful work in printing this publication. Much gratitude is also extended to the lenders and to the artists' galleries who facilitated the loan of works.

I wish to note the important guidance and support provided by the Exhibitions Advisory Committee of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. Other colleagues to whom I am indebted for assisting with the realization of this exhibition and catalog are Lois Weisberg, Commissioner; Janet Carl Smith, Deputy Commissioner, Cultural Programming; Pat Matsumoto, Assistant Commissioner, Communications Division; Gregory Knight, Director of Visual Arts; Sofia Zutautas, Exhibition Coordinator/Assistant Curator; Greg Lunceford, Installation Coordinator; Valentine Judge, Director of Marketing; Mary Murphy, Coordinator of Education; and Linda Wedenoja, Public Relations Manager. In addition, we are indebted to the Chicago Cultural Center Foundation for financial support of this endeavor and to the D.C.A. Development staff for its efforts in securing additional funding for the publication.

To all of those mentioned above, and to all others involved with this project, I extend my sincere appreciation.

It's been fourteen years since the last major exhibition of art using language at the Chicago Cultural Center. "Urgent Messages," an expansive survey of word and image art curated by Don Baum and Kenneth C. Burkhart, included both academically trained contemporary artists and outsider artists from the midwest and south, an unusual linkage arising from the curators' shared interest in artists employing language in an "intuitive, personal, diaristic, and autobiographical [manner], as opposed to pursuing a strictly formalistic approach."¹ The exhibit stressed the difference between the narrative usages of the selected artists and the concern with the nature of language associated with conceptual art. Russell Bowman, director of the Milwaukee Art Museum, emphasized in his catalog essay that conceptualists explore "the multiple paradox in the differences between letters and sounds, words and images, and words and meaning," whereas the artists in "Urgent Messages" favored "the directness of language without irony... whether for everyday reference, narrative, autobiographical, aphoristic, socio-critical or visionary ends."²

Also in 1987, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, in conjunction with the Newport Harbor Art Museum, presented "CalArts: Skeptical Belief(s)," an exhibit loaded with words that examined the scope and influence of the conceptually based art curriculum at California Institute of the Arts. Among the former CalArts students in the exhibit were Ashley Bickerton, Barbara Bloom, Dorit Cypis, Larry Johnson, Mike Kelley, Tony Oursler, Stephen Prina, Jim Shaw, and Mitchell Syrop, all of whom make use of language in their work. In his catalog essay, Douglas Huebler, a major figure in conceptual art who was also director of the Program in Art at CalArts, pointed to conceptualism's intent as one of "vastly enlarg[ing] the subject matter of art by creating modes of representation for phenomena that Formalism had no way to 'picture,' e.g., time, tide, ideas, infinity, sociopolitical realities.... So everything—all categories of things—could henceforth be regarded as the subject of art, with language functioning as the glue binding together the construction of a given work."³

The two 1987 exhibitions dealt with different aspects of language in art. "Urgent Messages" focused on language as narrative, that is to say, its storytelling function, while "CalArts: Skeptical Belief(s)" featured language as inscription and as the instrument of art theory. These several modes of language also provide a starting point for describing the work of the artists included in "Con/textual." The most strikingly narrative-driven practice in this selection is that of Ellen Rothenberg. Her eloquent series of installations, "The Anne Frank Project" (1990–), has utilized a range of quotational strategies in examining not only with the text of Frank's diary but also the discourses on history, memory, and authenticity that surround it, recasting its terms according to the ideological biases of various agencies. Rothenberg's contribution to this exhibition is *Ecstasy on Arrest* (2000), a suite of digital prints based on a 1914

newspaper photograph of women being arrested at a suffragist demonstration. Details from the photograph and its caption appear on separate panels, cropped and manipulated to bring out the artifactual qualities of the selected material. The degraded texts and images are allegories speaking to a moment of lost history.

The paraphrastic text of Helen Mirra's *Navigator* (2000) is adapted from a silent film by Buster Keaton. In ink letters on long, narrow cotton bands, Mirra summarizes the action of the film in dreamily elliptical language: "He's in the little boat / He's rowing and rowing / Rowing and rowing / She's yelling to him from the side of the ship / His little boat is sinking..." The poignance of the calamities befalling the actor is heightened by Mirra's lyric narration, which viewers must walk slowly along the walls to read. Edith Altman's eloquent and multivarious art has incorporated language in a variety of forms since the mid-1970s. Included in "Con/textual" are photo documentation of her *Art Words* (1975), bumper stickers with catch phrases of art criticism, *Chariot* (1987), from a series of alchemical diagrams, and *Gift of Confusion* (2001), an example of her recent work. The narrative voice in Altman's art is one of spirit as well as concept, connected to an awareness of the mystery and poetry of existence.

The language of signage is both imprecatory and abbreviated, offering directions to readers who are expected to encounter the sign while in search of the person or service it advertises. As such, signage is a category of inscription, generating meaning through proportion and materiality as well as through syntactical operations. Carol Jackson's idiosyncratic signage consists of panels of rawhide on which the artist has painstakingly painted and embossed such messages as "It's No Longer HOPELESS, Everyone Must KNOW" and "Gaping WOUND Repair: Drop-Off Service Available." Jackson imitates the lettering styles of commercial sign painters, but her texts are weirdly interiorized, as if she were advertising her ordinarily personal anxieties or hysteria. Karen Reimer substitutes stitchery for typesetting in simulating book pages and other printed fragments—a page from the Gospels, say, or a traffic ticket. Using a needle and thread, she carefully copies the type and other graphic elements onto small pieces of cotton, including even marginal notations added to pages by readers (including herself, perhaps?).

The caption and the label are also aspects of inscriptive language in its dialectical mode, with meaning arising from the proximity of image and text and the object it sits upon. Adam Brooks has used the effect of labeling in a number of objects and installations since the mid-1980s. He makes reference to tattoo, that most bodily form of captioning, in a series of black-and-white photographs of people moving articles of clothing aside to disclose, for instance, a belly bearing the word *perception* or an upper arm inscribed with *meaning*. The charge in Brooks's *Porn* (1997), a wall-mounted shelf holding a stack of computer disks, comes from the title word, in bold capital letters, printed on the labels of the diskettes. Max King Cap uses the inscription to provide an unsettling linguistic supplement to

otherwise innocuous materials. His video *A Greater Serbia* (2001) features a monitor with a blue screen, blank except for a line of white text in the typographic style of closed captioning. Phrases like “whimpering” and “mocking laughter,” floating within an otherwise empty field, suggest the horrors of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

Several artists make reference to the stultifying environments of institutional culture, using exaggeration or double entendres to bring out the subtly uncanny aspects of daily routine. Kristin Avery’s installation *Space Jones* (1999-2000) appears to be a bleakly anonymous office cubicle, but the artist’s words can be found in such desktop accessories as a rolodex whose tabs include lines of vivid poetry. Stephanie Brooks employs rhetorical substitutions within familiar bureaucratic or scientific signage systems. Her textual alterations of placards, directories, flow charts, and other graphic devices are both humorous and subversive, revealing the proximity of institutional language to the absurd. Christine LoFaso’s *Conversational* (2001) appropriates twelve of the Cultural Center’s plush sitting room chairs as sites for unexpected reading. She has made slip covers for the six chairs in each of two alcoves at the north end of the building. These covers, in brownish-black Jacquard-woven fabric, include lines of text excerpted from fifty different people’s responses to a set of five questions concerning their feelings about their bodies. There is a striking disjunction between the personal confessional language of the quotes and the mechanized process by which they are stitched into the fabric.

Jane Calvin’s photographs are densely saturated composites of fragmentary images and texts, frequently taken from advertisements and romance fiction. She photographs this material and projects it onto tableaux of objects and other images, then rephotographs the result. The tableau is a form inherited from painting, and Calvin’s accumulations of chromatic and textual details are reminiscent of the still life, reproducing its logic of seduction within the photographic field. Saturated fields of found texts are also present in Mary Dritschel’s work. The collages in Dritschel’s series “Painted Ladies” are postcard images of famous paintings framed by paint swatches matching areas of the painting. The colors’ suggestive names—“Razzmatazz,” “Burning Bush,” “Fairy Vision”—thus supplement the canonical central image, a deKooning woman, for example, or a recumbent nude by Courbet. Dritschel also quotes from the tradition of quilting in *Blanket Statement* (2001) a large gridded arrangement of warning labels from commercial packaging. The cautionary texts of the labels are subtly contradicted by the comforting visual reference that arises from the patterning.

Text transmutes into sound in three installations here. The digitally edited speech in M. W. Burns’s multichannel sound work, *Fountain* (2001), emanates from a cluster of speakers in the middle of the exhibition space. On one channel, multiple recorded voices are transformed into an ambient hum, sounding like a cloud of flies. Burns himself provides the speech on the second channel, forming words in his closed mouth. Without exhalation his voice is

reduced to a strained murmur. The composite effect is a metaphor for the ineluctable difficulty of communication. Lou Mallozzi has replaced the recorded announcements in two elevators at the north end of the Cultural Center, which usually alternate a male and a female voice reciting floor numbers as the car ascends or descends. Mallozzi's version intercuts extremely brief segments of announcements spoken by many male and female voices, creating a tremulous ambisexual utterance. Moreover, the pronouncement of the floor number is interrupted by the sound of a door slamming—once on the first floor, twice on the second, and so on—injecting a subtle drama into a mundane elevator ride. Stephen Lapthisophon's installation *Reading Effect* (2001) comprises digitized and photocopied images purloined from media sources and accompanied by the "voice" of Lapthisophon's computer, which recites a forty-five-minute soliloquy incorporating found language and the artist's own writing. Visually and aurally dense, *Reading Effect* is saturated with references to a universe of fragmentary documentation and quotation. Lapthisophon has accomplished a phantasmagorical commentary on history and forgetting.

Mark Booth, whose work often incorporates sound, here presents an installation of small enamel paintings featuring highly stylized letters corresponding to impossible animal hybrids (for example, "an elephant-headed horse" or "a bison-footed cormorant"). The piece has the epic title *An unrelated text, "A Short List of Merged Animals," excerpted from a larger poetic work, and combined with aspects of a lingering childhood anxiety from viewing Gerry Anderson's "Space 1999," Episode 23 entitled "Dragon's Domain," starring Gerry Garko as Tony Cellini in which the disturbed astronaut is tragically vindicated after five years of disbelief, ridicule, and rejection on the part of his peers, when he is witnessed being eaten alive in a graveyard of lost spaceships by a hideous disappearing and reappearing monster, a horrific all consuming entity that is impervious to all modern defenses but whose lone glowing chartreuse eye is vulnerable to the primitive end of a sharpened instrument* (2001). Here and in his related sound piece on the enclosed CD Booth manifests his obsessive, ruminative engagement with history, fantasy, and memory.

Textuality, the thematic "unity" that binds these artists together, is a rather slippery rope. No particular aspect of language is evident in more than a few of the works in "Con/textual," and there are other ways of negotiating words that don't appear here at all. What is generally shared among the artists in this exhibit is an understanding that language must function as a link between viewers and context, offering possibilities of illumination and understanding that bring many facets of our social experience into view.

1. Don Baum, curatorial statement in *Urgent Messages*, exh. cat. (Chicago Cultural Center, 1987), 9.


2. Russell Bowman, "Urgent Messages: Words without Paradox," in *Urgent Messages*, 11, 26.

3. Douglas Huebler, "Comments on CalArts," in *CalArts: Skeptical Beliefs*, exh. cat. (Renaissance Society, 1987), 7.

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