

## SERIOUS ART CRITICISM

### WORDS AND THINGS

"I was mixing story, anecdote . . . with visual representation, while giving less importance . . . to the visual element than one generally gives in painting. Already I didn't want to be preoccupied with visual language . . . Everything was becoming conceptual, that is, it depended on things other than the retina." —Marcel Duchamp in *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp (DaCapo Press, republication of 1971 English translation)* pp. 38-39.

Duchamp's oncerivolutionary "non-relational" approach to art is nowadays more common than Southern California mini-malls. Pencils and paint often share the stage with words, ideas, and objects, the integration of which is considered a standard art form. Random December visits to

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various L.A. alternative art spaces proved as much, beginning with "Imprint of the Interior," a Cheryl Dullabaun installation.

Part of the Armony's "Muses" show of artist/writer collaborations, Dullabaun's installation employed a series of shadow boxes encased by panels of smoked glass. Etched into the smoked glass and printed elsewhere in the installation were the evocative phrases of writer and anthropologist Sondra Hale: "Blood related/She and I breathed together/Witness from below her halo red with realization/With love, Jenni-lei/Forced to large/imprint of the Interior/ Something of Mine/Fears that bind us in a double embrace . . ."

Peeking through small cut-outs in the shadow boxes one saw "anthropological artifacts" of mother-daughter relationships spanning various eras, including baby shoes or old mother-daughter letters and photos. These artifacts were combined with visual metaphors for mother-daughter roles, such

of objects in aesthetically pleasing geometric patterns. A hip, artist-produced alternative to the new weekend-long hotel-room gallery exhibits, the Lotus Motel featured, for an entire weekend, work of over twenty artists in the unpretentious environment of deterioratinginglewood motel rooms.

Reiniger's piece juxtaposed 78 Polaroids placed in a grid pattern on top of a bed against hundreds of seemingly random numbers drawn onto wall-sized mirrors. The Polaroids were of objects and spaces such as a toaster, a jacket, a studio interior, that had no obvious relationship other than as a kind of catalogue of the artist's (and/or versus society's) possessions or desires.

The arbitrariness of the numbers and objects were reminiscent of Foucault, who decades ago examined knowledge and language as forms of order rooted in hidden networks of prescribed cultural codes. Foucault once pointed out the absurdity of a portion of a certain Chinese encyclopedia,

as described in a passage in Borges, "In which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) fabulous, (f) included in the present classification, (g) frenzied, (h) innumerable, (i) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (j) that from a long way off look like flies.'" Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Vintage Books, 1973) p. xv.

Clearly, this incongruous, disordered arrangement of the listed categories (which some speculate Borges fabricated) appears ridiculous to the Westerner because the things enumerated exist in an "unthinkable space."

Reiniger's "unthinkable space" consisted of random numbers, objects and spaces that were less absurd than we might think in an age of rampant materialism, multimedia technology, pluralistic cultures, rapidly shifting values, and increasingly popular theories about chaos, anything goes and anything is possible.

Which is precisely the point. Just as Duchamp challenged rules of art history by giving art status to common objects such as

here for you anymore unless you start being honest with me... I'm really concerned that you're heading for disaster... um... I wish I could do something for you but... I don't know what... [and] its wearing me out worrying about you...."

The speaker's monologue portrayed a frustrated friend?lover?actor? finally giving up on a suicidal person?/artist? who refused help. The implicit metaphor suggested a much larger, more eerie relationship: the speaker representing the voice of our collective conscience, and the one refusing help representing our entire globe, hell bent on a path of increasingly tolerated human and environmental genocide. In "To Whom It May Concern," the artist switches roles from purported suicide victim to frustrated truthsayer, exhausted but still trying to warn us of our own impending doom.

Words and things. (Interestingly, this is the more accurate translation of Foucault's "Les Mots et Les Choses," which has always been translated into English as "The Order of Things.") In the world of what we still call "art," words and things figure as prominently as the traditional "retinal" elements. Duchamp so wanted to de-emphasize. Which brings us back to that old adage: "Watch out. You may just get what you wish for."

In Otto's suicide piece, the "retinal" element has disappeared entirely. Language and thought are all that remain. Oddly, the piece self-referentially sings "retinal" art's swan song, as if to say "Goodbye... you'll be sorry when I'm gone." Perhaps Otto simultaneously suggests that the "retinal" in art is not truly prepared to die, but is merely screaming for help in the same way that anyone attempting suicide cries out to be saved, subconsciously praying to remain alive.

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a snow shovel, Reiniger challenged Western paradigms and logic by exploring the relationships among, and cultural assumptions about, seemingly disparate numbers and objects. (Incidentally, not all the art in the Lotus Motel was as striking as Reiniger's piece, but elements from a number of installations were equally memorable, including Linda Day's inventive license display, Sherry Zuckerman's by-now famous car-pet photos, organizers Lynne Barman and Kathy Chenoweth's whimsical "Tactory" products, Carrie Ungerman's plastic tree leaves and Ashley Thomer's cone sculptures of fiberglass and Jolly Ranchers candy.)

Pushing the Duchamp inspired "non-retinal" approach to extremes, a Susan Otto collage in the POST gallery group show "Self-Portraitay" went a step further in form than Reiniger or any of the "Muses."

Susan Otto's *To Whom It May Concern (Suicide Ransom Notes)*, self-referentially sings "retinal" art's swan song.

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collaborations. In "To Whom It May Concern (Suicide Ransom Notes)," Otto used language as the exclusive element in this artwork. "To Whom It May Concern" consisted of a series of seven cliché suicidal messages, including *You'll Be Sorry When I'm Gone* and *Goodbye Cruel World (Please Feed My Dog)*. The messages were constructed from mostly black and white (i.e. death) with a few red (i.e. blood) and blue (i.e. veins) letters cut out of newspapers and magazines.

This surrealistic collage technique, as old as Duchamp, would in and of itself be dull. But it was brought to life by the audio recording of an answering machine message: "We need to talk... I'm not going to be