

PAPER CITY

STYLE | FASHION | SOCIAL

HOUSTON OCTOBER 2006

ART Notes

It's the pinnacle of the season.
Get thee to a museum.

Gallery must-sees: Neva Mikulicz's hyperrealist graphite drawings pay homage to the 1950s at **Anya Tish Gallery** (October 20 – November 27) ... "Pupas" by **Magdalen Celestino** at **Mackey Gallery** (October 6 – November 10) ... Wood masters **Troy Woods** at **McMurtrey Gallery** (through October 14) and **Patrick Renner** at **Poissant Gallery** (through October 28) ... Maestro of the collage **Lance Letscher** at **McMurtrey Gallery**, opening October 21 ... At **Meredith Long & Company**, **Dennis Blagg**'s inspiring landscapes (opening October 19).

Save these dates: Saturday, October 7, 5 – 8 pm; **Winter Street Studios'** open house (free; winterstreetstudios.net) ... Sunday, October 8, the opening of the **Ricardo Legorreta**-designed addition to Corpus Christi's **South Texas Institute for the Arts** (free) ... Saturday and Sunday, October 14 and 15, **Bayou City Art Festival Downtown** (\$8 adults, free for children under 12; bayoucityartfestival.com) ... Thursday, October 19, 6 – 9 pm, The Studio's Tasting on the Terrace at **CAMH** (free for Studio members, \$20 nonmembers; 713.284.8264) ... Acclaimed art pundit **Lucy Lippard** and other distinguished critics at **Deborah Colton Gallery**, Friday, October 20, 6:30 pm (\$12.50; reservations 713.864.2364) ... **Project Row Houses'** Arts & Cultural Festival, Friday – Saturday, October 20 – 21 (free; projectrowhouses.org) ... Mukuru "Arts for AIDS" benefit concert at **Live Oak Friends Meeting House**, Sunday, October 22, 6:30 pm (\$20; mukuru.org) ... Score a *retablo* at **Lawndale Art Center's** Dia le los Muertos gala and silent auction, Thursday, October 26, 7 pm, chaired by **Libbie Masterson** and **Michelle Lewis** (\$35; 713.528.5858).

Catherine D. Ansporn

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it t
Str
The Dark Side
of Fashion

WORD
Deborah Colton Gallery

Jeff Ward



Gary Sweeney, *Art Must Take Reality by Surprise*, 2002
Assorted signage
93 x 173 inches

Two installations situated side by side at Deborah Colton Gallery summarize the central neurosis of the group exhibition *WORD*. The first is an arrangement of glossy flyers, hastily designed pictures of babies, birds and Microsoft CEO Bill Gates with text touting the book *Making Dying Legal* by Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline H. Gins; adjacent, the second installation is composed of artist Gary Sweeney's signage materials. Arakawa, an architect and Gins, a poet, want you to access their ideas for utopian urban planning, which are largely theoretical and unrealized. Their advertisements/protest posters strewn lazily across the wall seem like afterthoughts whose materiality is not intended to be engaged with too intensely. The Sweeney installation, on the other hand—a ransom note of found objects that spell out *Art Must Take Reality by Surprise*, a quotation attributed to author Francois Sagan—beckons us to read into the individuated history of each element.

The use of text in (or as) artwork, particularly how it was employed by Fluxus and early conceptual artists included in this exhibition, forefronts, as Lucy Lippard wrote in the 1968 article *The Dematerialization of Art*, “the idea that art can be experienced in order to extract an idea or underlying intellectual scheme as well as to perceive its formal structure...[which might precipitate] writers becoming more like artists and artists becoming like writers.” The confusing range of operations a viewer undertakes with *WORD* replicates how text-based strategies contribute to a contested sense of how contemporary artwork functions.



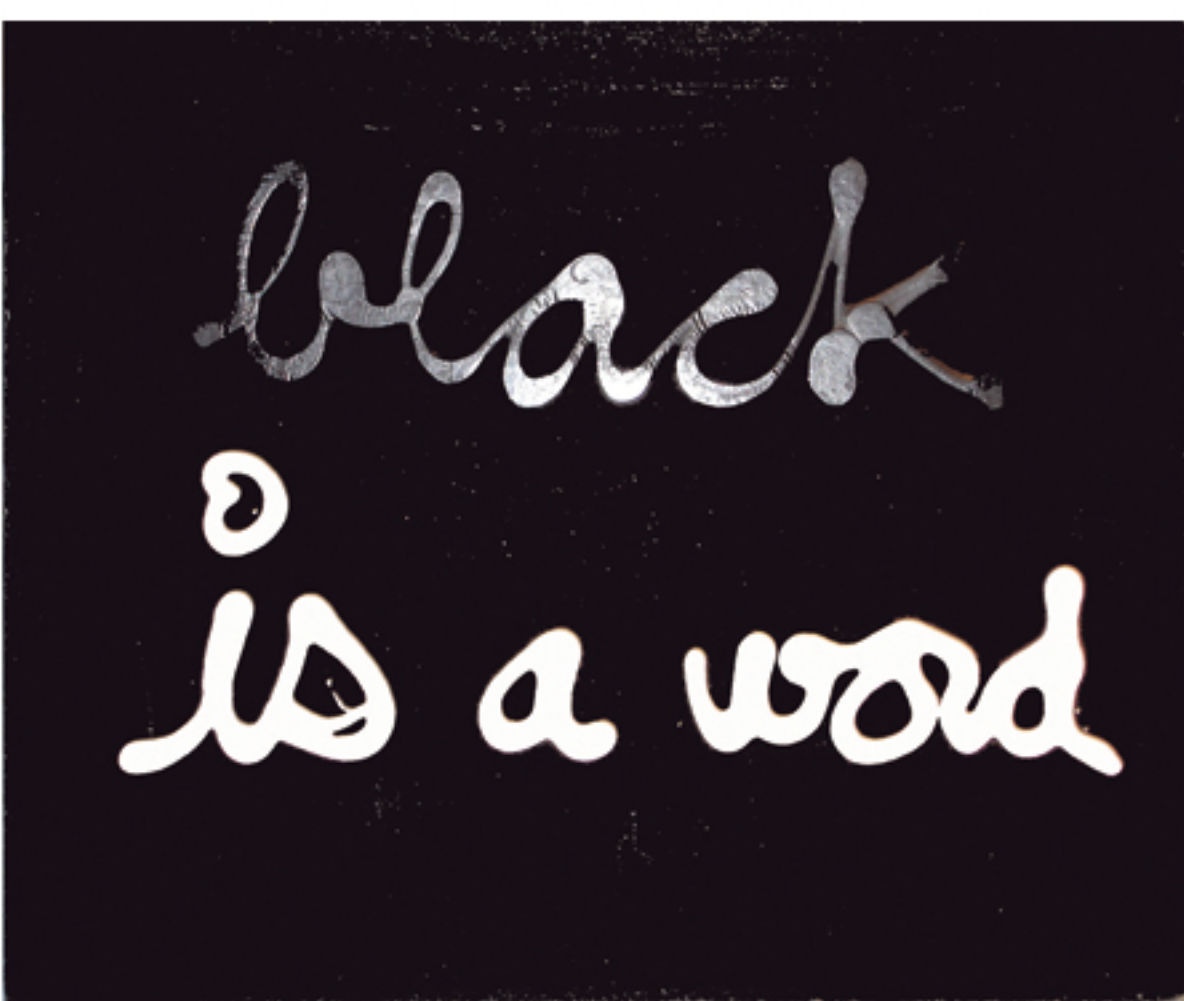
Lawrence Weiner, *Along Down the Line a Bit*, 1999
Vinyl type on drywall
Dimensions variable

A number of *WORD*'s works, like Philippe Maucotel's freestanding metal script *thing*, use text to critique a particular medium. What is sculpture? It's a thing, and this one's cheeky, too. Ben Vautier's *black is a word* and *red is a color* from 1975, however, perform similar operations more problematically and interestingly. Both of Vautier's titles are spelled out in paint. Soupy cursive on warped canvas board bow away from the wall, highlighting the ultimate objecthood of painting, as does Maucotel. By highlighting the materiality of sculpture while assigning words a meaning and color, Maucotel underscores the philosophically arbitrary but socially potent variance among words and their various meanings.

A preponderance of works, though, combine materials and text more obliquely to add a poetic opening up of meaning for their materials. The Art Guys' wooden rafters span the corners of rooms like bracing beams, carrying messages like *This is No Laughing Matter*. A brown highway sign by Allison Wiese instructs us to *Root Hog or Die*. A hair comb by *WORD* curator and artist L. Brandon Krall reads *Excellence is the Subtlest Form of Subversion*. This strategy is less illuminating on the nature of words but is more or less successful in causing a viewer to muse at length about the meaning of a particular object.



Ben Vautier, *Red is a Word*, 1975
Acrylic on canvas board
20 x 24 inches



Ben Vautier, *Black is a Word*, 1975
Acrylic on canvas board
20 x 24 inches

Other strategies are less successful. *8 Good and 8 Evils*, also by Krall, falls flat by using text to bluntly brand a particular meaning onto materials. Bamboo mats are benignly labeled “ENERGY - PRAXIS” while “INJUSTICE” is reserved for gold mesh; the moral distinction between these two materials seems even more arbitrary since they are both conjoined to Plexiglas. Wayne Gilbert makes the opposite mistake by taking inconsistent, birdseedlike crematory remains—matter that matters already—and goops them into text paintings. Worst of all, he then sites a series of human and animal names as his materials. Yuck! William Stone is another kind of yuckster, labeling his wooden altarpiece that houses a hamburger roll *The Role of the Church*. Combined with the text strategies that can be read throughout the show, viewing becomes a heady game.

Adding more confusion, the exhibition is littered with a range of non-art objects. Besides the Arakawa/Gins installation/retail display, another section of monographs, books and ephemera are difficult to separate from the number of books displayed behind glass, on pedestals or intentionally out of reach. Celia Alvarez Muñoz' book-art pieces, for instance, are displayed on the wall (as they are designed to be), but a postcard to the curator from artist James Lee Byars is displayed in a glass dome near a pile of research books, which are meant to be leafed through.

This confusion of texts and information, rather than helping clarify the idea behind the work, highlights how the confusion of roles among artist, writer and curator in the contemporary art world—a condition arrived at in part through the efforts of artists included in *WORD*—can obfuscate the meaning of the art object. Instead of considering the artists' intended meaning, we interrogate the context. Rather than feeling elucidated, we feel suspicious. Is the splay of magazine pullouts designed by blue-chip artists culled from the Rolodex of globe-trotting mega-curator Hans Ulrich Obrist and fashionista/gallerist agnès b. *art*? Is the dissolution of roles anticipated by Lippard helping artists sculpt ideas, or does it make all artwork solely about apparatuses of power?

None of this confusion should be—or is—inherently verboten. However, some pieces in *WORD* are done a disservice by confusion. For example, Lawrence Weiner's *Along Down the Line a Bit*, one of his famous wall text pieces, gains power by being a contrary strategy to objectmaking. Here, even though it was hung among spare, modern objects, it seemed inert and difficult to evaluate. This work, like the Ed Ruscha print *Pews* or Joseph Kosuth's *Essay #7*, seemed like a placeholder for seminal text-based practices. The best-looking works in *WORD*, therefore, are those that either command their context or are sweetly ambivalent to the confusion around them.

For example, Christian Xatrec's *This Sign (Not) for Sale [Autology]*, a double-sided placard that can be arranged to espouse a more or less commercial intention at the whim of the gallerist, is lazily nimble in the confusion dramatized by *WORD*. Jenny Holzer's *Little Blue Corner* works here because the babbling stream of text that tripped across the LED screen was less self-assured than the truisms for which she is known. Lippard and Jerry Kearns' *Happy New Year* essays—originally published in *The Village Voice* between 1981 and 1985 and reproduced as a set of lithographs this year—exhibit a thoughtful shift of context. The look of oxidized paper is captured while the technique exhibits a preparedness to meet the viewer in the gallery.

Yoko Ono's message *Imagine Piece*, however, works precisely because it is not in the gallery. Its highway location and stark black text on the white billboard works especially well for Ono's post 9/11 message, as it references Ono's most well-known artworks (even if they are not always remembered as art) with her late husband. An untitled Robert Barry index card, however, sums up *WORD* best. Manually typewritten in 1970, its fading Robert Barry text what any art object must feel of itself: “SOMETHING WHICH CAN NEVER BE ANY SPECIFIC THING.”

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