



“Character Generator”

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For this group exhibition, Matthew Lyons, a curator from the Kitchen in New York, gathered a collection of nearly all black-and-white works by nine artists undertaking a range of poetic and political challenges to the orderly system of language—what Roland Barthes saw as its inherent fascism. Exploring terrain connected to that charted by figures such as Mel Bochner and Robert Barry in the 1960s, several artists here examined moments in which communication seems too rigid or fixed in its meaning, or where it otherwise breaks down and exposes its own flaws. A few pieces appeared hostile to the ways in which language prioritizes or structures reality, and stood out in their aversions toward its supposedly straightforward communicative capacity.

Among exemplars of the latter approach was Karl Holmqvist's *I'm with You in Rockland*, 2005, which offered a paradigmatic disintegration of sense, seeming to mirror a disordered experience of the world. The twenty-five-minute “music video” features lyrics in white text popping on and off the bottom of a black screen as the artist languidly speaks. Like a singsong stream-of-consciousness poem, littered with pop-culture references, the seemingly nonsensical flow of words is punctuated every so often by the phrase: HOW DO YOU SAY. Adjacent to Holmqvist's work, Mathew Cerletty's painting *Fact*, 2009, put forward similarly wobbly wordplay: NOT TO THE FACT THAT WHO READS THEM is inscribed in a variety of fonts on its surface, a reference-cum-

memorial to a sentence that the artist garbled in high school during a live recording for a faux newscast.

A few works imparted a sense of the personal as political, highlighting the potential of language to undermine or camouflage identity. Cody Trepte's *Twenty Most Frequently Used Words (Written and Spoken)*, 2008, delivers just that in two square silk screens with the glaring omission of any female pronouns. Installed as a foil, perhaps, on a small adjacent shelf, Emily Roysdon's *Surprise . . . You're Pregnant!*, 2007–2009, takes the form of a pair of acetate glasses, with its title inscribed on the top rim of the frames. The work may seem absurd at first, but provokes open-ended questions about gender and perception.

Four typed-text pieces by Christopher Knowles, the elder artist of the exhibition, offered the show's most compelling take on linguistic power, and shed some light on Knowles's idiosyncratic and distinctly experimental practice. *Untitled (Ronald Reagan's 1983 Budget)*, 1983, quixotically compares the artist's expenditures (on sneakers and cassette tapes) with Reagan's \$770 trillion budget of that year. The humorous undertone resonated nicely with Roysdon's glasses, where a blur of wit and folly undermines the boundaries between public and private—and between art and life.

If each work could be seen as a letter, strung together piece by piece in the show to produce meaning as a character generator would, then Shannon Ebner's *Untitled*, 2008, created an obstruction. The only photograph on view, it portrays a solitary figure holding a large blank white sign while standing on a small tarp-covered hill in a barren and dusty landscape. The sign seemed to symbolize agency, or at least the capacity to act, and in the specific context of this exhibition it pointed to the limitations of words, slogans, and messages. Rather, it seemed to suggest that more might be said with silence.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler



Shannon Ebner, *Untitled*, 2008, black-and-white photograph, 31 1/2 x 40 1/2". From "Character Generator."