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ENTROPY

Materriality and the Imagetext: On Mitchell, Young, and Herritt

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Currently showing in Denver, Colorado are two exhibits that explore the hybrid space of text and image: Scott Young's Gas Light Love Bomb at K Contemporary and Linda Herritt's Good Girl at Rule Gallery.

As a conceptual entryway into both Young and Herritt's work, art historian's W.J.T. Mitchell's Picture Theory offers interesting passage. Although somewhat dated in its examples (due, in no small part, to its pre-internet publication date), his monograph affords instructive points of departure for considering art and literature that meet at the intersection of image and word.

In Picture Theory, Mitchell defines three interrelated but distinct terms: image/text, imagetext, and image-text. The first of these three designations addresses the "problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation"; the second "designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text"; and the third attends to the "relations [between] visual and verbal." In other words, the slash refers to a certain incommensurability, the concatenation specifies a type of work, and the dash indicates a particular relationship.

With regard to these terms, Mitchell argues against a "Sister Arts" tradition, which analogously or comparatively examines the literary and visual arts. Rather, he proposes to engage:

"The whole ensemble of relations between media, and relations can be many other things besides similarity, resemblance, and analogy. Difference is just as important as similarity, antagonism as crucial as collaboration, dissonance and division of labor as interesting as harmony and blending of function. Even the concept of "relations" between media must be kept open to question: is radical incommensurability a relation or non-relation? Is a radical synthesis or identity of word and image a relation or non-relation?"

As an anodyne to the "Sister Arts" mode of critique, Mitchell provides the following remedy: "The best preventive to comparative methods is an insistence on literalness and materiality. That's why," he says, it's "more helpful to begin with actual conjunctions of words and images in illustrated texts, or mixed media." In doing so, he reasons that "one encounters a concrete set of empirical givens, an image-text structure responsive to prevailing conventions (or resistance to conventions) governing the relations of visual and verbal experience."

A closer look, then, at the materiality of Young and Herritt's artwork gives some insight into their underlying concepts by considering their "empirical givens." Moreover, such an analysis highlights the antagonisms found within each artists' work; antagonisms, to be sure, that provide the works with depth of thought and nuanced rhetoric.

Scott Young's *Gas Light Love Bomb*

Neon, by all accounts, is an inherently paradoxical medium. For many, the soft glow of neon signage captures the essence of rampant commercialism and debauched consumerism; and the flickering lights of the Vegas strip serve as a depraved exemplar of those willing to gamble away their workday earnings in hedonistic revelry. The luminescence of this capitalist bacchanalia, though, contrasts with the artisanal origins of neon lighting.

As Christoph Ribbat notes in the opening chapter of his book Flickering Light: A History of Neon, most neon signage was "not made in anonymous, automated factories, but in down-to-earth workshops where glass blowers and sign writers produced these new signs using their breath, mouths, and hands." Indeed, handmade artistry underpins neon signage. On the one hand, neon irradiates the night sky with unabashed capitalism; on the other hand, each sign is designed as singular item fashioned by the skilled hands of an artisan.

Through twenty-four pieces of neon art, Scott Young's Gas Light Love Bomb plots the trajectory of a romantic relationship: from its ecstatic origins to its aggrieved dissolution. In doing so, the exhibit embodies the contradictory spirit of neon light. This tension is no more apparent than in his series of mixed media works titled These are the Things I Should Have Said.

Comprised of six, 20" x 20" x 5" pieces, each canvas face bears a pithy phrase articulated by a lover to their beloved. Young painted the text as black Helvetic font on a flat white background. Hovering above select words or letters, red neon approximates a scribbled strikeout. For example, one painting reads: "I'm not done yet." Neon foregrounds the words "not" and "yet"; to this end, the text could alternatively read: "I'm done." The obfuscating gesture, then, provides two contradictory readings: to be both "done" and "not done" with a beloved. Such an interpretation, then, echoes the conflict inherent to neon's historical development.

Of course, the neon strikeout doesn't actually conceal the text beneath it. In fact, one could easily argue the converse: that the neon glow more effectively highlights the underlying text, emphasizing the redacted words through its red luminescence. As such, the strikeout can be read as a faux-gesture: an act of insincerity that accentuates the original statement, while simultaneously calling attention to the lover's struggle to undercut its claim. In other words, an act of emotional exhibitionism.

Rather than conveying whether or not one is done with a beloved, this second interpretation foregrounds the fraught internal life of the lover. Publicizing these emotional and psychological reversals suggests that the lover's internal strife supersedes the importance of their relationship with a beloved. In this sense, the conflict of These are the Things I Should Have Said does not locate itself between the lover and the beloved, but within the lover themself. To wit, an invisible internal state manifests itself as an external declaration in the realm of public discourse.

Regardless of how one reads the surface elements of the pieces, though, something is concealed literally and materially in the These are the Things I Should Have Said series: the electrical components and structural support for the individual pieces' surface elements. The fabrication that affords a viewer an unencumbered, aesthetic experience recedes behind the artworks' artifice: the appearance of art obfuscates the work of art. The labor of art and its material history acquiesce to the beholder's visual experience and, thus, pleasure. Which begs the question: does a lover enabling a beloved's delusion constitute love? Likewise, how does commercialism/consumerism obfuscate, alter, or aestheticize our relationship to romance, to love, to art, to appearance, to the other, and to the self?

Linda Herritt's *Good Girl*

Linda Herritt, *Dog Commands,*
mixed materials, 84 x 96 x 3 in

Relatively speaking, the history of neon is rather short. The gas, discovered by chemists in 1898, is barely 120 years old. In contrast to neon's youthfulness, textiles emerged around 3400 B.C. when Egyptians first began spinning thread. As far as acting as a source material for the arts, threaded fabric has been in use for nearly fifty-five hundred years. Not surprisingly, then, textiles bear the weight of their own set of cultural and aesthetic contradictions.

As Rozsika Parker argues in her book The Subversive Stich: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine: "The art of embroidery has been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal, and of proving they have attained it, but it has also provided a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity." Artist-scholar Elizabeth Emery reiterates these thoughts in a Vice interview, when she noted: "male-dominated culture has ignored women's creative labor as being docile, uncreative, and unpolitical; but the symbology of what women were creating holds deeply subversive messages." Textiles, thus, can confine a female artist to reductive spaces, or offer them the freedom to contest normative paradigms.

The work in Linda Herritt's exhibit Good Girl attends to the aforementioned contradictions embedded within the history of textile art. Of specific note is Herritt's piece "Dog Commands." Herritt built the 87" x 75" x 3" wall installation from angora yarn, felt, burlap, fringe, trim, and striped fabric among other materials. The artist creates words by using fabric to outline the contours of letters and filling in their counters. She produces letters and words, then, in the negative space between textile swatches. On the one hand, then, the textiles create the letters; but, on the other hand, they locate themselves outside the structure of those letters. In essence, the threaded elements of her piece are both linguistic and non-linguistic elements: a dual identity at odds with themselves.

If the artist's work simply addressed a split identity that straddles the boundary of language and not-language, viewers could relegate "Dog Commands" to the well-trod realms of ontology and semiotics. But the nature of the language she employs offers her audience another, more culturally pertinent register in which to think about the piece: the power dynamics embedded in speech. Indeed, the language found in "Dog Commands" is just that: imperative statements directed toward canines in an effort to regulate their behavior: sit, stay, lie down, roll over, and beg.

On the surface, these commands could be read as playful punning on materiality: the woof and warp of the textile's weave. The woof is an obvious allusion to the dog's bark; and the warp addresses the distortion of words through enjambment, floating x- and y-axes, and an alteration of font-size. But the material history of textiles and its relationship to the feminine encourage a gender-based interpretation.

Historically-speaking, art production by females resides on the outside or fringes of a male-dominated discourse. Canon formation, funding opportunities, mainstream acclaim, and gallery space traditionally have skewed toward male artists. Dominate modes of production and promotion marginalize the "domestic arts" and their female producers to the spaces outside of power.

Of course, power centers and their coincident language of command are, ultimately, vacant structures built in relation to those who are subject to their commands. How can one wield power without a subject to dominate? How can one levy commands without a subject to order? The center is only the silhouette of a word, not the word itself. A ghost architecture built upon those creating outside its framework.

This is not to discount the negative effects of power. Surely, power centers produce very real and imbalanced consequences; but it takes only a modicum of critical acuity to demonstrate the impotence of a power center's validity or "truth" claims. By modulating the distance between themselves and "Dog Commands," viewers experience an analogue to the facile nature of power. From afar, the text's borders appear to be smooth, coherent lines. Upon a closer engagement, the outline of the letters is frayed and uneven: literally, a threadbare scaffolding. To this extent, the letters and words are precarious because the textiles that provide them with shape appear to be in danger of untethering and coming undone. The language of command is only as strong as the margins that define it: an illusion of authority located outside of the word.

It would appear that the work of Young and Herritt operate in distinctly different spheres with regard to materiality and concept. Young's exhibit employs neon to explore the solipsistic nature of contemporary relationships, while Herritt's show enlists textiles as a means of critiquing gender-based inequalities. But, I would argue, viewing Gas Light Love Bomb and Good Girl in conjunction with one another affords viewers both a broader and more nuanced understanding of imagetexts and image-text relationships. By constellating around the imagetext concept vis-à-vis these two exhibits, Mitchell's insistence on the materiality and literalness of interpreting hybrid works becomes all the more apparent. Such a critical strategy helps to generate a series of productive antagonisms that open both artists' work to compelling lines of inquiry and thought.

Young's Gas Light Love Bomb runs until December 2 at K Contemporary, and Linda Herritt's Good Girl shows at Rule Gallery until December 23. If you live in Denver, or will be visiting the area during that time, be sure to check them both out.