

Simple, Dumb Objects

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Martin Brief, Dean Kessmann, and Molly Springfield address the connotational power of written language. They do not make didactic, word-based declarations, nor do they obviously tip their hat to past Conceptual art precedents. Instead, they individually explore the various institutional structures that help shape the meaning of the printed word within and beyond the art world. Their subtle practices share affinities with more recent endeavors by young artists who attempt to rethink Conceptual art from the 1960s. Like many of their contemporaries, Brief, Kessmann, and Springfield place great importance on the idea. However, they also give equal stress to visual techniques in order to make the ordinary appear strange—a method that makes their art both disquieting and insightful.

Martin Brief takes literal information and abstracts it. With *The New York Times* as his template, he “mindlessly” fills in all the “O’s” of a given story. The results are ethereal drawings, scattered with dots that form seemingly non-compositional shapes, which creates a humorous take on On Kawara’s date paintings. Initially, his work appears without referent, however, he titles his pieces after the article from which he generated the pattern. This tangible signifier transforms the assembled markings into an allusion of meaning, but it still fails to offer the viewer any real sense of the article’s content. For Brief, the disconnect between the work’s title and the image on the page hints at the ephemerality of mass media and the way news stories—plus the words that create them—drift in and out of our everyday lives. Brief’s drawings turn written language into a system of abstract codes. They do not seem that far away from the 1’s and 0’s underpinning the operating systems of our computers, which is as an unsettling of a realization as it is true.

Dean Kessmann focuses his attention on art magazines, however less for their content and more for their compositional qualities. Kessmann, like many of us, reads these monthly spreads cover to cover. However, a chance realization (while holding a magazine rolled in his hand) led him to see how these powerful determinants of the comings and goings of the art world can become beautiful objects in their own right. On first blush, these photographs seem more like architectural structures. They’re akin to some of Thomas Ruff’s buildings, and they have a detachment that would make Bernd and Hilla Becher proud. In fact, Kessmann photographs his magazines under specific conditions (i.e. concentrating only on winter issues). He creates a topology that blurs the distinction between various publications. In Kessmann’s world they all began to take on the same characteristics. This deflates the institutional power associated with specific magazines. It also plays on the tradition of art magazine art of the likes of Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, while it simultaneously reminds us of the powerful sway these printed matter hold over us.

As Brief and Kessmann delve into structural elements constituting the transmission of written language, Molly Springfield actually recreates specific texts via drawing. Her precise, pencil on paper renderings have the mysterious qualities of a Vija Celmins seascape, where everything is referential yet there is no context in which to understand the image. Indeed, in Springfield’s pictures, books sit alone, devoid of any situational space. She selects her subject matter from iconic art historical and philosophical texts like Hal Foster’s *The Return of*

the Real and Plato's *Phaedrus*. These books seem to be hers as they are marked up with marginalia. This personalizes her depictions further, giving the viewer a brief glimpse at her tastes and predilections. However, something is off. The drawings' detachment is such that these books no longer seem real—as if the images were haunted. Springfield's representations estrange these texts from any associative connotations. It is as if she deflates them of their intellectual power and instead turns them into simple, dumb objects.

Brief, Kessmann, and Springfield use absurdity and personal experience to make perceptive comments about the larger world in which we live. There are clear links to Conceptualists traditions, yet the formal techniques they employ not only offer a personalized update on the past, but also give sway to the power of images. These are smart, seductive works that give the viewer the sense that we live in an odd, unsettling, but still visually engaging world.