

An Artist Takes Matters Into His Own Hands: Dean Kessmann's *Cover to Cover*

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Dean Kessmann combines the visual appeal of color-field painting with the conceptual foundations of appropriation and typology in the breathtaking installation *Cover to Cover*. The artist attributes the inspiration for this new work to his habit of leafing through art magazines, such as *Art Forum* and *Art in America*, rolling them into cylinders, and musing over the colorful patterns formed by the overlapping edges of their pages. Kessmann explains he chose the subject of this series by "reflecting on what I do on a daily basis"¹. Professor and Coordinator of the Photography program of the George Washington University Department of Art and Art History, Kessmann often uses time between classes to read recent art publications. To produce the works in this exhibition he scanned the edges of rolled art magazines, manipulated the images digitally, and printed them out on fine art paper with an ink-jet printer. Kessmann's works read, at first sight, as nonrepresentational compositions which have an unmistakable pictorial affinity with the striped canvases of Washington Color painters Kenneth Noland and Gene Davis. But under close observation Kessmann's prints reveal the objects that gave rise to them through slivers of pictures and printed words visible at the overlapping edges of each magazine page. Shadows cast by one page onto the next as they were scanned underscore the materiality of the magazines. To heighten awareness of the magazines' objecthood, Kessmann installed his prints in consistent relation to the gallery lighting, in a horizontal orientation in which the shadows appear to fall in a downward direction. The result is an installation of art with the powers to grasp visual attention and to hold intellectual interest fast within its grip.

Kessmann asserts *Cover to Cover* is "ultimately about the re-presentation of bound reproductions of contemporary art and culture". Because pictures of art are reproduced in the magazines he images, he designates his works as "appropriations of reproductions of reproductions." He explains, "The digital mutation - dots of ink placed on magazine stock, scanned, manipulated and saved, then output with ink sprayed onto fine art paper - is as referential as it is abstract." Kessmann identifies as an antecedent Sherrie Levine's photographic appropriation in 1979 of photographs made in 1925 by Edward Weston². By exhibiting and publishing her images of Weston's work, Levine violated copyright and stirred debate over originality, ownership and value in art. Departing from Levine's direct reproductions, Kessmann distances his images formally from their objective sources by selectively manipulating proximity, form, and scale to reduce every page in each magazine to a thin stream of color.

Kessmann's works are distinguished from one another by varying colors and linear rhythms. For example, in "Tema Celeste, November/December 2003 (front)" a warm palette of yellows, reds, and oranges issues from the many colorful illustrations typical of this publication. In contrast, "Art Journal, Winter 2003 (front)" exhibits a paler, more restricted range of hues which may reflect this publication's scholarly orientation. Working in the tradition of Bernd and Hilla Becher's typologies of the early 1970s³, Kessmann conceived his serial compositions as a collective study of variation among like structures. Whereas the Bechers avoided the intrusion of personal presence in their documentation of industrial artifacts, Kessmann's scanned images reveal his personal touch. The action of the artist's hand is recorded in the rippled and slightly crimped appearance of the edges of some of the magazine pages he thumbed through and rolled. These irregularities divert edges which were originally uniformly straight into flowing and undulating ribbons of color reminiscent of Morris Louis's veil paintings. Unlike the stained surfaces of Louis's poured paintings, where no brush strokes or gestures of the painter's hand are visible, Kessmann's images

bespeak the artist's handling of his raw materials, the pages of the magazines he scanned. Yet it is highly significant that these visual records of the artist's touch were not created directly by the actions of Kessmann's hand on the fine art paper, but were rather mediated by digital processes.

Kessmann reduced the semantic contents of art magazines (i.e., articles, ads, and exhibition reviews) to formal stimuli through the simple act of rolling them into cylinders. In titles like "Art Review International Edition, Volume 1, no. 12, 2003" he alludes to the textual content of the magazine, but this content is not fully present in the images. Kessmann's work is in this sense conversant with Rachel Whiteread's plaster sculpture "Untitled (Library)", 1999 and Buzz Spector's photograph "Conaway's Shakespeare", 2001, both of whom employed the forms of books in their imagery without divulging the books' textual contents. Like Spector and Whiteread, Kessmann retains in his work the cultural import of the original format of bound text. The distinguishing factor in Kessmann's concept is that he substantially *abbreviates* the objects he images to create pictorial *synecdoches* in which an isolated *part* of each magazine (i.e., the edges of its pages) figures the *whole* journal. Kessmann's abbreviated imagery signifies, by extension, the eminent workings of the art world, including gallery representation, advertizing, and journalistic criticism, which are codified in the ads, articles and reviews printed between the covers of art journals.

Herein lies the most potent aspect of this series' conceptual power: in these works Kessmann concretizes the artist's idealistic desire to *take the art establishment in hand*, or to master the forces that drive the art industry. At the same time, he demonstrates that, in contemporary art, the physical activity of the *artist's hand* is increasingly mediated by digital processes. The artist's *hand* is, of course, also a synecdoche, as this part of the body figures the entire artist and has been employed historically as an emblem of artisanal virtue⁴. Paradoxically, as the artist reaches to gain more direct control of his career by employing current technologies to output competitive work into the contemporary market, he finds himself increasingly removed from the processes that construct his public identity as well from those processes that construct his images. Kessmann's works successfully thematize this paradox. Because the records of his handling of the magazines are imaged through digital manipulation and ink-jet printing, Kessmann's prints speak to the depersonalized nature of contemporary image making in which digital processes are superceding manual techniques. In its subject - art magazines - Kessmann's series invites reflection on the mechanisms through which art becomes further depersonalized as it is commercially packaged and then circulated in the broad economic system of the art industry through the agency of journalistic publication.

Kessmann emphasizes the dissonance between the concepts of the touch of the artistic master's hand and the sterility of digital methodology in the format he imposes on his images in the installation, as their horizontal orientation is simultaneously reminiscent of American landscape painting and evocative of streams of digital code. Arranging them in rows that wrap frieze-like around the gallery, he varies the scale of his prints from 5 x 22 inches to 22 x 70 inches to create the appearance of intermittently faster and slower flowing passages of digital data. With this technological conceit Kessmann advances Levine's discourse on appropriation by signaling that the notion of an *original* work of art is becoming increasingly meaningless in the context of digital technology where it is impossible to differentiate a replicated image from its source. Kessmann's digital metaphor also resonates deeply with the economic sub-text of the Bechers' classification of obsolete industrial forms insofar as it prompts us to reflect that even the days of thumbing through art magazines may soon be drawing to a close as the gathering momentum of electronic publishing promises to render the familiar bound-paper format an obsolete cultural artifact. In this impressive installation Kessmann effectively articulates a comprehensive understanding of the moment of digital technology in contemporary art.

¹ All quotes from the artist are based on discussions with him in Washington, D.C. between September 2003 and February 2004.

² Levine stressed appropriation in her selection of photographs of Weston's son in a pose derived from a male nude figure by the ancient Greek sculptor Praxiteles. See: Susan Krane and Phyllis Rosenzweig, *Art at the Edge: Sherrie Levine*, exh. cat., High Museum of Art, Atlanta and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., March 9 - May 30; June 11 - September 4, 1988, *passim*.

³ See: *Anonyme Skulpturen. Eine Typologie technischer Bauten*, Düsseldorf, 1970, *passim*.

⁴ On the artist's hand as an emblem of artisanal virtue see: Walter Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck*, Chicago & London, 1991, 44-47, 50-59, 227-241. Also see by the same author: "Memorabilia aliquot Romanae strenuitatis exempla: The Thematics of Artisanal Virtue in Hendrick Goltzius's *Roman Heroes*", *Modern Language Notes* 110 (1995) 1090-1134.