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Word For Word {a flesh wound} A travelling exhibition for a hypothetical space

Doug Back, Joe Bodolai, Susan Schelle, Francesca Vivenza, Robert Watts
Summer 1989

Given the current predilection for absolute analytical constructs, it has become convenient to deposit works of art into the issue of "Ideology Illustrated" (the companion guide to Classics Illustrated)... or worse, to abandon work in the netherland of a previous critical position or historical categorization. This dilemma confronts not only the viewer and art-producer at the end of the 20th century, but must also return to the curator as the standard-bearer of "meaning".

This exhibition consists of five works which have been temporarily re-claimed from any previous examination (or indifference) in order to consider their collective meaning as a model for interpretation. I am not suggesting that the critical descriptions which follow are radical individually, but rather that there are points of convergence which might not be considered under prevailing conditions.

The vociferous element of contemporary art practice has moved the cultural icon to a more cautious realm of the visual referent. An example of this can be seen in the distinction made between "classical" Pop Art — the elevation of the banal — to the invocation of Pop through the current practice of an aestheticization of the banal. This is more than an exercise of semiotic cross-breeding. A qualitative change takes place — how art is valued and what value is invested in it through the mechanisms of culture and economy.

"I have seen the nuance, and it was good"

The question of meaningful associations in contemporary art is seen in the practice of ironic truisms drawn from advertising. The desire or intent to parody accidental irony results in an impasse. The literal becomes a "more exotic species" — holding the viewer's attention suspended, so to speak, between what is believed to be true (what is seen) and the unspoken (what is assumed or received). The strategy of picture-text has been a part of 20th century art repertoire since Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* The aestheticization of language/text as picture/subject has continued in the work of artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Maurizio Nannuci, and Barbara Kruger. The distinction made in the works selected is that the confrontational, proclaiming "an intellectual, transgressive rigour for its time", is put aside for the subtlety of inquiry.

As a common ground, the works by Robert Watts and Doug Back have visual equations manifest in a literal meaning, entering a play on words. The works by Francesca Vivenza and Joe Bodolai construct an inquiry from text/language to object, reversing this process of interpretation. The final work, by Susan

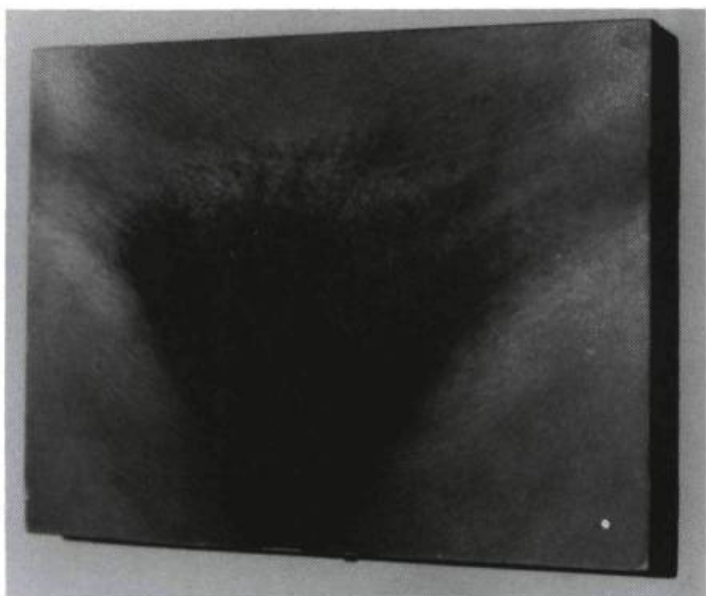
Schelle, suggests another type of inquiry, one directed between image and text.

Robert Watts' work falls into an ambiguous area because of an association with many seminal figures of the early 1960's, neo-dada Fluxus group and of Pop Art. *Girl with Mole that Lights Up* (illus. #1) does not comfortably fit into either camp, but neither can it be claimed for the territory of new photographic irony. The literal quality of the work proceeds from the visual equivalence of its title. That aspect is self-fulfilling, if not self-evident. The complexity arises from the non-aesthetic quality of the photograph. *Girl with Mole that Lights Up* is not a portrait of a girl. The intimacy of the view becomes an invasion of the "private" revealing only(!) an identification of gender. The "mole", a miniature light bulb, is the object discreetly positioned in the lower right corner (upper thigh). It does, as the title describes, light up. Watts blurs the distinction between object (the photograph or light bulb) and subject (the "girl" or the "mole") through a bi-polarity of voyeurism and innocence.

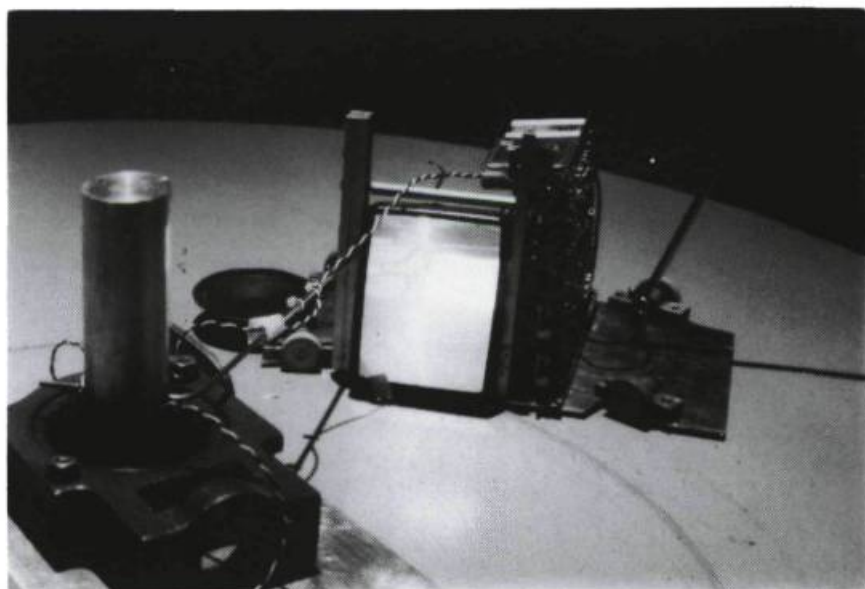
Because of its technological component, Doug Back's *Small Artist Pushing Technology* (illus. #2) may be forever relegated to the ghetto of machine-metaphor. The title alludes to this dilemma, "pushing the technology", but also to a literal reference of the artist's image, seen "pushing" against the side of a small monitor. As "he pushes", the vehicle appears to respond. The Sisyphus reference is extended from the allegorical to apparent demonstration. Like Watts' photograph, Back's gesture is simple enough but the viewer is left questioning the true location of the meaning — the vehicle/technology as the object, or the technology/image as the subject.

The subject of Joe Bodolai's, *Toward More Picturesque Speech* (illus. #3) appears to be the meaning of the term "manhole cover" through an anecdotal text. That the work is in reality a manhole cover, has less to do with its meaning as an object, but everything to do with how the anecdote is received. The presence of a manhole cover, as the vehicle for the text, appears to legitimize the veracity of the incident. Bodolai suspends his story at the "climax", with the possibility of a profound disclosure. The abrupt closure has a cliff-hanger quality. We may know the word. We may say the word... but we cannot see it. Duchampian strategy is transformed into stand-up comedy.

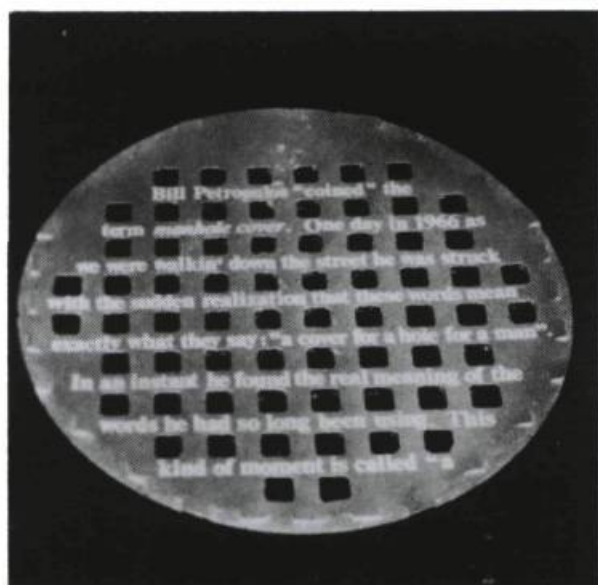
In the levelling of text and object, Francesca Vivenza's *Fiat Lux* (illus. #4) suggests a poetic equation. A letter, in Italian, serving as the focal point and subject, is "illegible" (because of "our" cultural illiteracy) and therefore, can be appreciated only for its symbolic



1.



2.



3.

value. For Vivenza, the meaning is real and literal — it is to be read — and if we do not have the necessary vocabulary or skills to do so, other clues are left for us to consider. She has taken one of her early paintings and obscured it with a layer of black paint. The “letter from home” is both illuminated and obscured by the absurd imposition of a night light. An unspoken expression appears — night/letter/night-light — which is then hung out to dry on chains. Vivenza’s work is vulnerable because it holds an emotional state and personal meaning which cannot be entered except by admitting to a similar condition of dislocation.

The “illustration-image” in Susan Schelle’s work, *Novel* (illus. #5) is a meticulous “quote” acknowledging the secondary stage of its reproduction. Left alone, the image might be titled “The correct way to mount a footstool — etiquette for the Modern librarian c. 1950”. But to dislodge the self-evident irony, Schelle has added a “found” text. This plot digest does not reveal the quality of writing or social insight but remains at the level of generalized references of desire — the power of sex, money, and place. The unseen novel could as easily be a pulp romance or a hard-cover exposé... or perhaps a literary masterpiece. In order to construct possible scenarios between image and text, we are told nothing more than we need to know. Schelle’s *Novel* leaves everything to the imagination. It is a “good read”, operating on the knife-edge of wit and satire.

Post-script

The reader is, admittedly, at a disadvantage in dealing with this exhibition, since it is, as stated, hypothetical. The “flesh wound” subtitle is not an apology for any brevity or incompleteness. I prefer that the reader/viewer be left with options rather than a predicament resulting from the open-ended nature of the hypothesis. The works do exist but cannot be viewed in a conventional gallery-object-catalogue context. The “catalogue” is the only tangible evidence of activity and its existence is dependant on a host body — this issue of *ETC Montréal*. If the catalogue does not fulfill the expectations of autonomy, perhaps the notion of autonomy is suspect. Conventional exhibition publications are invariably identified and consumed by the institution of origin and often serve as the primary objective, reducing the experience of the work to the role of adjunct.

The issue is not whether the selected works can withstand the critical inspection of installation, but whether the integrity of the work can be served within this model. In developing this project, it was suggested that an acceleration was taking place — a leap from curatorial premise to consumption, leaving the “art at home”. If this were the only objective, virtually any work of art could be treated in a similar manner... but

that would become another curatorial sleight-of-hand. It is foolish to think that any or all works of art can be reclaimed from their cultural repository to exist in a neutral state. (The cross-chronological selection of these works is itself an issue.) What is not discussed, is in the end, as important as what is discussed.

Word For Word has the advantage of being a “free geographic agent” — therefore a “travelling” exhibition. It is hoped that interest and curiosity extend beyond the page.

Ihor Holubizky

ARTISTS’ BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Doug Back was born in Toronto in 1954. He has been exhibiting in group and solo exhibitions in Canada and abroad since 1979.

Joe Bodolai was born in Youngstown, Ohio in 1948 and has lived in Toronto intermittently since 1970. An artist and writer, he exhibited in group and solo exhibitions until 1975, leaving the art world of his own volition.

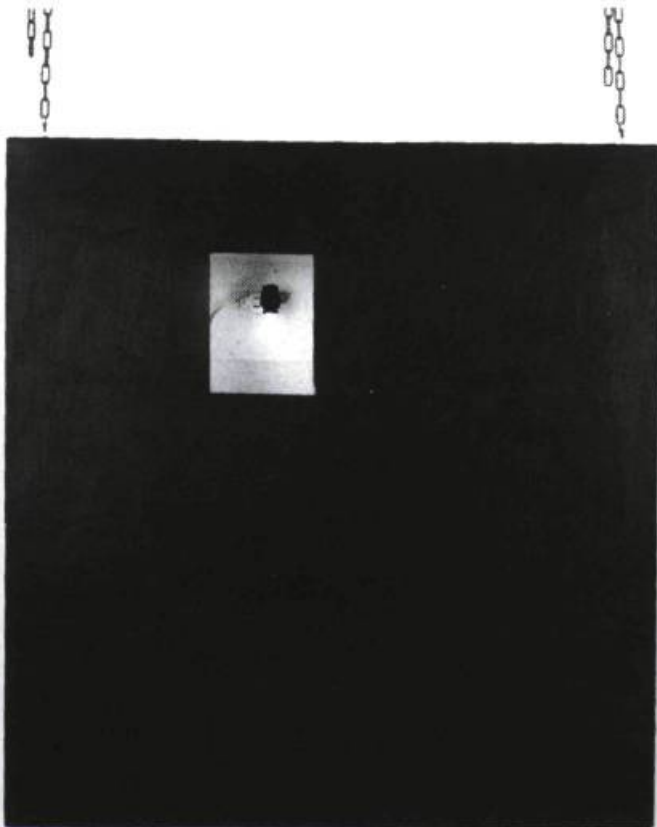
Susan Schelle was born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1947 and now lives and works in Toronto. She has exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions in Canada and the United States since 1977. Her work is represented through Cold City Gallery, Toronto.

Francesca Vivenza was born in Rome in 1941 and has lived in Toronto and abroad since 1970. Her work has been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions in Canada and abroad since 1964.


Robert Watts (American b. 1923 — d. 1988) exhibited extensively in group and solo exhibitions in the United States and Europe from 1953.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Robert Watts, *Girl with Mole that Lights Up*, 1971. Black & white photograph, mixed media, light, 9V battery; 18.4 x 24.2 cm. Collection : Sam Markle, Toronto
2. Doug Back, *Small Artist Pushing Technology*, 1987. Electronic components, mixed media; installation dimensions 24 x 120 x 300 cm. Collection of the artist
3. Joe Bodolai, *Toward More Picturesque Speech*, 1973. Enamel on cast iron manhole cover; 61 x 61 x 7.5 cm. Collection : Dr. Howard Paynen
4. Francesca Vivenza, *Fiat Lux*, 1987. Acrylic on used canvas, letter, painted night light, chains; 91.5 x 81.2 cm. Collection of the artist
5. Susan Schelle, *Novel*, 1987-88. Black & white photograph; 42.7 x 35 cm. From the Merritt Bell Farrell collection, Toronto



4.



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5.