

In So Many Words

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Pictures perhaps more than words currently shape our public memory. So why words? What words? Whose words? Must they be accepted without question? Are they life threatening? Do they hook into our fears and desires? Or can they be completely dismissed? Answers to these questions often depend on where one sits upon the hierarchical scales of the structures of power.

Words. Handed down, like the Ten Commandments, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights. Issued by “the father,” the law, or the Internal Revenue Service. Sold to us as “news,” “sports,” “pleasure.” Dare we tune them out? Or can we make a meaningful response?

What is one’s voice as distinct from one’s vote, which becomes unrecognizable as savvy elected political representatives purport to speak for us? Who are we? Where are we? As Gary Garrels of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art writes in *Public Information*, “We do not know or judge ourselves simply by the neighborhoods in which we live or by the circles in which we work, that is, by direct daily experience. Rather, our identity as a society, and as individuals in it, is reflected in a mirror that is indirect and often unsolicited, in which we are voyeurs as much as participants.”

For the last fifty years, 1945 to 1995, we have lived in a culture that has remade itself, undergone a depth of transformation which is almost unfathomable. No previous century has experienced this level of change.

When “home” continuously changes into unfamiliar terrain, tremendous anxiety and ambiguity often shake the foundation of one’s “identity.” However, it is precisely within such periods of questioning, amid discontinuity and disorder, that tremendous potential for transformation exists.

In 1955, domestic worker Rosa Parks’ refusal to sit in the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, launched the modern civil rights movement largely because of mass media coverage. From that moment on, despite lapses in media attention that were to come, Americans could no longer “not see” that “racial identity” was a major determinant of one’s level of participation in the socio-political culture of the southeastern United States. Civil rights leaders, cognizant of the importance of national and international visibility, began organizing with a media audience in mind.

With television in the home, information and images documenting this dramatic confrontation were transmitted almost instantaneously and simultaneously throughout all reaches of society. Conscientious citizens, determined to do something about what they were seeing traveled south and volunteered to lay their bodies on the line. Some people lost their lives. Many civil rights activists went on to form the anti-war movement and perhaps most revolutionary of all, the feminist movement. The civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements remain important reference points of our national morality. However, as this century draws to a close, many of these changes are threatened. Inevitable, these social, political, and cultural transformations have profoundly influenced the visual arts.

Through feminist organizing, multivoiced resistance to hierarchies began to emerge. Women not only looked at their material, social, and psychological condition, but they also began to examine the exclusion that defined that condition. Much Feminist art of the early 1970s explored issues of personal identity and private versus collective experience. The so-called “universal” in art was exposed as specifically and subjectively male. Unfortunately, feminists addressing these issues and concerns in their art were ignored or derided by many critics.

Feminist art is today informed by the critical use of a number of theoretical frameworks including psychoanalysis, structuralism, and semiotics. Representation itself comes under scrutiny—the act of image-making, the construction of language, the operation of the mass media, and the institutional activities of the museum.

By the mid-1950s, mass media, advertising, and popular culture had begun to unravel the hierarchies and distinctions among the various media of the visual arts. Still, words were nothing new. Words or word fragments have been used with images throughout the history of Western art. And their use in visual art has not followed a singular path.

Forms such as happenings, video art, earth art, body art, pop art, op art, and light art began to interact with one another in the late 1960s. Much has already been written about the blurring of these boundaries.

IN SO MANY WORDS results from my being invited to put together, in short order, a regional multicultural exhibition of works utilizing image and text. The subjectivity of my own concerns played a role in the selection process. As a visual artist whose primary medium and methods integrate image and text, I do not limit my practice to art-world values and narrow aesthetic concerns. Therefore, as curator of this exhibition, the works I have chosen to embrace the political and aesthetic, high and low, cheap and dear, public and private, practical and theoretical.

From the start I sought a clarity and singularity of voice in the work that I reviewed. Additionally I asked, what is this particular artist trying to say? Why did the artist use words? What is the artist’s relationship to the object and word, to the “culture” the artist speaks from? Is the work stuck within a formula? Or does it evolve in complexity?

Rather than selecting a theme that might overly simplify or submerge differences, I wanted to maintain the distinction and integrity of the individual artists’ voices. To that extent, the show’s organizing principle is also a disorganizing principle. The artists represent themselves rather than any style or group. I also sought to initiate a dialogue between generations, classes, cultures, and sexes to allow the tensions and textures inherent in a multivoiced environment to emerge.

IN SO MANY WORDS includes work by eighteen artists. The works reflect pronounced differences in intent, method, and motivation. The shifts in point of view require the collaboration of the audience. The individual viewer is compelled to question her or his perceptions about culture, history, reality, stereotypes, identity, visibility, and voice. Discontinuities will test our need for reassurance, our desire for something familiar.

Certainly, no artist’s work can be categorized in any simple or stratified manner. However, a few observations about the works may provide a helpful framework. Siah Armajani, Harriet Bart, and Amy Cropper draw visual ideas from history, literature, and

architecture and conceptually explore the intersection of cultural values, interests, and desires. Griffith Day, Mary Disney, Karen Platt, Margaret Stratton, and Sandra Taylor recontextualize familiar words and images from popular culture to displace, expand, or change accepted meanings and stereotypical image.

Me-K Ando, Rochelle Woldorsky, and Francis Yellow work to restructure experience, reframe a past. Colette Gaitor, Rik Sferra, and Ann Sundberg appropriate the entire mass media and advertising genre as a means to critique the medium as well as the message. Prophet Blackmon, Patrick Lubber, and Piotr Szyhalski question morality and virtue through ideas from contemporary culture using techniques of folk art and craft. Yi Kai uses elements of ancient languages to create work in which design, pattern, and decoration predominate.