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Contextual trappings: a strategy of contradiction

Richard Metzgar

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Contextual Trappings: A Strategy of Contradiction

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I ain't superstitious but a black cat crossed my trail.

Willie Dixon

The good news is the government stands behind every deposit ... the bad news is the taxpayer stands behind the government.

FDIC Chairman William Siedman, 1991

What is given and what is withheld become the work. You could say that if you make a statement it eliminates the options; on the other hand if you're a logician, the opposite immediately becomes a possibility. I try to make work that leaves options, or is open-ended in some way.

Bruce Nauman, 1987
INTRODUCTION

The focus of this thesis is to examine a multiplicity of ideas in which the presence of contradiction is the unifying component. This "process" of examination has been decidedly "expansive." I am emphasizing process and expansive because these terms could best describe the underlying philosophical attitude driving this body of work: process in relation to both conceptual as well as material considerations.

Conceptually, I have given myself the opportunity to examine a broad range of issues, understanding the realization that all levels of worldly stimuli become raw material for an artistic statement. Similarly, in regards to material approaches, selecting the technical processes and materials which appear to be the most appropriate to further articulate the specific issue or idea. Lastly, both of these activities were approached "open endedly," allowing the opportunity to consider and respond to all levels of experience.

The body of this paper has been organized into eight narratives, each narrative commenting on the evolution of the individual work it represents. The paper will conclude with a brief observation.
"Blush" (Appendix A)

The origin for "Blush" was an offset poster by the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres which I had picked up at an exhibition entitled "Rhetorical Image" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in January, 1991. The posters were stacked four feet high with a caption that read, "Please take one," so I did. This 20 x 24" poster contained a small black and white image in the center of the field depicting a nuclear missile spiralling out of control over a body of water. Below the image was the word "Beautiful". This seemed to me an eloquent statement of contradiction, clearly articulating the "reality" of the world in which we live. I could at once aesthetically appreciate the beautiful quality of the gently spiralling rocket (a Smithson jetty in the sky) and likewise, the issues it was addressing. I discovered that this photograph had originally been presented in the New York Times. Later, the artist Louise Lawler used the image. Then, Gonzalez-Torres intervened with his ideas to again transform its meaning. I became quite interested in conceptually furthering the "history" of this image; to again intervene upon this image and manipulate its existing meaning. The urgency of articulating a new statement from this image became chillingly current later that evening as the United States bombed Iraq.

I decided to isolate the Gonzalez-Torres image in a field. I chose a red velour paper which I had burned a hole through to physically and materially extend the destructive capability of the image being represented. I formally played this image against a red plastic "livestock" tag imprinted with a numeral 2. This object was included for aesthetic as well as conceptual reasons. This ready made/found/appropriated object at once brought a dimensionalness to the flat field as well as extended the conceptual range of speculation. Textually, it became Beautiful 2 (Too), and at the same time provided an identification system to the missile (Rocket #2?).
The intention was to produce an image which was visually as well as conceptually engaging; to present a range of associations to be considered.

"The Puppeteer (After Charles Keating)" (Appendix B)

The idea behind this work was quite simple - to make a visual statement regarding the savings and loan scandal of 1990. This event like no other of 1990 became the quintessential example of the misuse of power in relation to public trust. My preoccupation with these investigations heightened my awareness of the inherent corruption within our sanctioned institutions.

This work focused on the most celebrated of the S&L failures, the Lincoln Savings and Loan bank of California, headed by Charles Keating. I decided to initially approach the image textually to focus on words as a primary element. I was interested in the play of language and how it is approached and "entered" differently. Text as a visual component is conceptually different than the perception of non-textual images. I was interested in constructing an image in which text became the dominant conceptual as well as visual component.

The process began with a word play association surrounding Lincoln Savings, which became LINCOLN SAVEFACE. By changing this last syllable it dramatically altered my perception and strengthened the potential (highly directed) meaning of the statement. Textually, the meanings became entangled, contradicted by sanctioned meanings of the words. Our associations with the word Lincoln - President Lincoln, (an oval office presence), Lincoln Continental, and the copper penny are quick references. The words LINCOLN SAVEFACE represented a clear statement of public mistrust.
surrounding governmental regulators. Formally, this image developed out of an architectural impulse to create a facade, which led to the representation of a door, the bank door in which you would enter to deposit your entrusted funds.

"Swing Low Sweet Charlot" (Appendix C)

This work began from principally a formal consideration involving a stretched canvas with a square "cut out" and a 1/8 x16 x 16" copper plate. As in some of the other works during this thesis, the cut outs serve two purposes: A) To violate the surface of the picture plane, and in so doing giving the stretched canvas a physical alteration; to emphasize its "thingness", objecthood, and B) to metaphorically suggest an outer and inner layer of skin; what is read or presented on the surface and what is actually taking place inside are not necessarily the same thing. The cut out became a frame and the window/void to the inside/outside. Conceptually, the move was simple - to dislocate the plate from its rational position within the frame. Materially, I wanted the surface to speak of its process oriented making, but without the evidence of a "brush stroke". I decided to apply a carborundum and hot wax mixture with a drywall knife. This arrival of image via process is thus controlled by the amount of time the wax dries (a few seconds) and the speed in which I could trowel the mixture. The wax mixture was at once visually transparent and the surface physically dense. This transparent quality of material (as in the use of the matte mylar with other works) reinforced metaphorically a "transparent condition" information that is being presented on the surface is infected by the conditions present underneath the surface. The image that
appeared was perhaps a chemical experiment gone awry, or a battle ridden sky. With the arrival of this image, I was interested in materially contradicting this surface. Soon after completing this step, I visited New York and during my return trip had noted a few ideas concerning text and material considerations, mainly addressing ways to formally move a work from wall to floor (Fig. 1.). One idea placed the word "policy" on the wall. I was thinking about a material that would permit a fluid writing of this word on the wall and then connect to a canvas on the floor. Rope seemed to be an appropriate material, visually providing an umbilical cord to the panel below and metaphorically suggesting containment, restraint, and anxiety. This lead to the realization of completely wrapping the canvas with rope. This move to bury the underlying information of the wax surface again interested me conceptually as well; that is to say, to violate the surface of the canvas (via the cut out) to allow the information within to be viewed, and then negating this opportunity by completely covering it with rope (delivering the gag order) seemed within the spirit of a contradictory strategy. Besides, first and foremost, I wanted to experience visually what this thing would actually look like! Consequently, I purchased $100 of 1 inch rope (a limitation I imposed upon myself) which would cover approximately 1/4 of the canvas. The rope was attached and braided through the cut out inset, a physical move I found most compelling. In the meantime, I decided to place the canvas on the floor and allow it to lean up against the wall. Visually, the piece needed to be elevated slightly off the floor to allow the plate and rope to function correctly. I had acquired a pair of rubber casters, which had been part of a group of objects I purchased earlier in the year, objects which interested me visually and metaphorically. I attached the casters to the bottom of the canvas to
Fig. 1. Notebook entry
elevate the piece, at once creating a portable painting? a rolling thing? movement and speed were suddenly present.

The casters were part of a found object inventory (Fig. 2.) which included the following selected objects: A copper float, two aluminum pie plates which were embossed with the words "HOME DAIRY," which eventually became a matrix for a casted wax pie containing a copper fragment, a grinding handle, an aluminum gutter spout and wire trap, a piece of anthracite coal, two decoy grenades, red dice, two numbered plastic identification tags (numeral 2 and 69) a few bunge cords, a plastic animal nursing bottle, an aluminum funnel constructed to pour a wax cast, and a fragment of an earlier sculpture composed of riveted polypropelene snow fence. These objects were selected for their visual and metaphorical value. As is evident in the polaroids in Fig. 2., the objects I had collected interested me in their meaning as a sculptural body, here elevating them to 'sacred' objects on this aluminum mantle to explore their potential meaning. It is also important to note that this process of assembling objects and elements to investigate potential visual as well as conceptual possibilities was a constant method of evaluation that is an intrical part of my artistic practice (Fig. 3.).

The final move became the selection of text to be etched onto the copper plate. The words again were to provide another mental entry to the work and of course would greatly contribute to its potential meaning. I eventually selected a phrase which had permeated the world, a phrase which seemed so completely defined by its architects and yet became so hopelessly meaningless and quite contradictory when delivered New World Order.
Fig. 2. Work in progress
Fig. 3. Work in progress
This phrase became the quintessential buzz word during the Persian Gulf conflict. For me the term New World Order inescapably appeared to be "old world rhetoric." Within the context of the gulf war the projected meaning suggested that the US presence was necessary to secure future stability. In other words, the time tested theme war equals peace? This argument is sighted well in American history and is probably better served by historians than I. Nevertheless, New World Order suggests many different meanings depending on which side of the fence you sit, which is precisely why conceptually it interested me very much.

I was thinking about the repetition of the words, New World Order. (Fig. 4.) Formally, I decided to reorder the phrase to World Order New World to suggest a less than ideal ordered society. The manner in which the text is etched upon the plate is irregular. The left side column of the World melts as if to further suggest the potential precariousness of this New World Order.

"The Plight of the Urban Specialists" (Appendix D)

I was looking through a stack of postcards dating from 1900 to 1915. As I browsed, I came upon an image which appeared quite "appropriated", "manipulated". (Fig. 5.) It interested me as an image and contextually how it ironically related to present social, economic and cultural conditions. The postcard was commemorating the completed erection of the Land Title Building in Philadelphia dated 1908. The elevation of the building was superimposed by an elderly professional? gentleman, gazing upward to the text above which read, "LANDS SAKE! OLD PHILLY IS LOOKING UP SOME." Part of my interest in the card was the reference to Philadelphia. I had been
Fig. 4. Computer generated text
Fig. 5. Postcard
reading previously about the disastrous financial situations of many major U.S. cities, remembering a list which recorded the city budgets and deficit percentages per city - Philadelphia being at the top of the list with a 10% budget deficit. I had also recently seen a television expose documenting the daily duties of the Philadelphia commissioner. In one segment she discussed with her staff whether they should pay the building's gas bill or some other expense. (Her state of affairs seemed to parallel my own personal experience). In seeing this card, historically I was looking at an image celebrating its progress and life while contextually the Philly of today is gasping for its last breath. I was conceptually experiencing polar opposites.

With the image selected, my next decision was to decide on its presentation. I was thinking about the inherently flat nature of the photographic process and decided to oppose this condition physically by transforming the image via an 11 x 14 color print which would then be mounted on a 1" gatorboard substrate. I was interested in how this photographic image, which is flat, was depicting a 3-D object which, then in itself, would be presented and perceived as an object. To further that dichotomy, I decided to create a box whose form was determined by two factors: A) physically the box would be created in steel, a material relating to the sub-structure of the building. Its width determined by the visual dimension of the represented building and B) the form would visually and metaphorically represent a "piggy bank," a safe or vault which would house currency. The top of the steel bank contains a slot in which to deposit the funds. The position of the steel box was determined by positioning the slot directly under the pictured gentleman's outstretched hand, visually creating a "depositing gesture." From a solely frontal view, one could assume that the deposited funds would be kept safe within the steel container, however, the viewer will find upon closer
inspection (by looking under the box) that the box is in fact bottomless; it has corroded through completely. This initial perceived illusion then suddenly takes on a contrary reality, thus the statement metaphorically alludes to my perceptions on the economic conditions in Philadelphia as well as other American cities at this time and further stresses an awareness of the individuals and institutions which have participated in the cause and affect of these conditions.

"VALUE" (Appendix E)

This work began with an interest in making a statement out of this seductive sheet of matter - a 1/8 x 28 x 38" rectangle of copper. Aesthetically, I wanted to aggressively violate the existing condition of the copper sheet (albeit a satisfactory aesthetic statement in its own right). After two months of living with it leaning against my studio floor, I decided the copper field would encapsulate a single word. The decision was made at this point to burn (via the etching process) the letter forms completely through the 1/8" plate. With the basic formal considerations addressed, I began to search for a word. During the course of this body of work, I had been keeping notes which involved a form of word play. It became a way for me to record words and sentences which involved a contradictory spirit. This "stream of consciousness" or free form gamesmanship became a way for me to examine words and phrases for their potential meanings. Collectively, meaning itself can be seen as a primary modus operandi, and the activity of writing became another process in which to isolate this form of questioning. During one such writing session, I wrote down the word VALUE (Fig. 6.). This word at once seemed contradictory in its implied or suggested
Fig. 6. Notebook entry
meaning. It seemed to contain that immediate sense of specificity, yet after further consideration, becomes highly speculative in light of its potential meanings. Conceptually, the word seemed highly appropriate. With the word selected, I etched the plate in a 3 to 1 nitric acid bath, a rather aggressive approach which was based on my objective of biting completely through the plate in the shortest amount of time. Also, I allowed the resist to break down irregularly to visually allow evidence of the aggressive nature of the process. With the word VALUE creating a void in the copper plate, one reading sets up the ironic position of the generally preconceived notion of VALUE (i.e. of containing a positive implication) which becomes a figure within a sheet of copper which may have had its "useful value" negated by the corrosive condition of the existing plate. Has it destroyed its economic value outside its position as an aesthetic object of art? Is it dependent upon the perceiver? Lastly, the decision was made to position the work directly on the floor, leaning slightly back against the wall in an effort to enhance its position as an object. Likewise, the appearance of this rather casual placement may bring into question its "VALUE" as a serious aesthetic statement.

"Puck's Daydream" (Appendix F)

The initial notion was to present a square canvas containing two square cut-outs in which to focus information. This panel would be capped by another rectangular panel to complete its present dimension (Fig. 7.).

During the process of examining contradictory conditions, I stumbled upon a book published in 1924 entitled Editha's Burglar. The book's plot involved a young girl,
Editha, who discovers a burglar in her house and the insuing conversation that follows that encounter. When she discovers the burglar, she politely interrogates him as to his intentions. A passage from this conversation struck me as significant within the spirit of my inquiry and I selected it as text to be etched on copper to fill one of the insets (Fig. 8.);

The upper canvas and nylon stretched panel received a portion of an earlier 1990 ink wash drawing representing a system of marks over a submerging submarine image. The sub, which was selected for its metaphoric suggestion of deception and subversion, seemed to set up a curious narrative. For the other cutout, I posed a figure gesturing a "quiet sign" to the on-looker. The image that now existed suggested conditions of misrepresentation, distrust, and a level of absurdity.

"Inside the Looking Glass" (Appendix G)

I had three 2 x 3' stretchers in the studio. I was interested in applying text to these panels in some configuration. I had been using colored kite nylon and decided to create the sentence or phrase out of this material. The nylon interested me for its "deceptive quality" - from a distance the letter forms would appear to be painted, however, upon closer inspection, one would distinguish the weave of the fabric. This subtle deception conceptually interested me. My impulse to use fabric may have subliminally been spurred by a paper I had written in 1988 on the late German artist Blinky Palermo. Palermo had worked on a series of fabric paintings between 1966 and 1972 known as "Stoffbilder," which consisted of commercial colored fabric.
THE BURGLAR WAS SO AMAZED THAT HE ACTUALLY FORGOT HE WAS A BURGLAR, AND STAGGERED BACK AGAINST THE WALL. "YOU OUGHTN'T TO BURGLE ANYTHING," SHE SAID. "OF COURSE YOU KNOW THAT, BUT IF YOU HAVE REALLY MADE UP YOUR MIND TO DO IT, I WOULD LIKE TO SHOW YOU THE THINGS YOU'D BETTER TAKE."

Fig. 8. Computer generated text
These found colors were selected from available choices, and I too was interested in this material which carried its own inherent meaning.\textsuperscript{1}

During a word play session, I had arrived at the word UNDERDOG. That word became inserted in a question that eventually became IS THERE AN UNDERDOG PRESENT? (Fig. 9.). This phrase is quite speculative, which I enjoy, but it also represented my questioning of current political conditions that were becoming rather apparent during this period. The letter forms were configured in such a way that a quick registration was difficult to achieve. With that section complete, the piece hung on the studio wall for the next few months.

During the course of this work, I found another postcard from 1909 which represented a man crawling toward a whisky bottle in a park-like setting (Fig. 10.). The text in the left bottom corner read "So near and yet so far." The card itself was a multi-colored off-set litho with gold leafing, visually quite beautiful (this dichotomy between visual aesthetics and implied content is a constant dilemma it's contradictory).

Again, I was contextually bringing this image into the 90's for metaphoric value - it related to my opinion of current social and political conditions.

I photographically reproduced the image into a black and white stat, having cropped the whisky bottle and text. In the meantime, I constructed two cut-out canvases and placed the photostat image vertically into the bottom panel. This set up a strange  

\textsuperscript{1}Anne Rorimer, "Blinky Palermo: Objects, Stoffbilder, Wall Paintings," \textit{Art Forum} (November 1978): 33.
Fig. 9. Notebook entry/Work in progress
Fig. 10. Postcard
experience between "what we see and what we know" in its relationship to the UNDERDOG text above. Could this man be the underdog who is present and will defy gravity to save mankind from its current quandary? Hardly, but it did set up an engaging set of parameters on which to speculate its meaning.

The final component of "Inside the Looking Glass" would be a photographic portrait of sorts. I decided to document a "manipulated found object" I had constructed. The object was a kitschy smiling dinosaur which may have been a promo piece for a major fast food chain. I inserted a grenade clip into its head and painted it aluminum to present a casted appearance. I had used grenades in other pieces and this transformation evolved quite naturally. I also was quite interested in the flip/flop perceptions of pure Disney versus a volatile condition. I hired Rochester based photographer Tim Wilkes to shoot the images. The final image, one of two shot during that session, (Fig. 11.) depicts the "object" housed inside a plexiglass container. However, upon further inspection, it is determined that the object is actually behind the container looking inside. What appears to be the specimen for examination is not the specimen at all. This object of desire is itself looking at the inside of the container for its contents, just as the viewer is looking for the contents within. However, the empty void within the container is the passive player in this illusory game, for the object of focus is not the focus at all, but it is the confrontation between object and viewer which sets up the dialogue. Who is the specimen? What is actually being observed?
Fig. 11. Two photographic images
"Unquestionable Logic... Unspeakable Charms" (Appendix H)

This piece was executed as a temporary wall installation adjacent to the Mercer Gallery at Monroe Community College, October 4, 1990 - February 19, 1991. The work evolved through two stages. The first stage lasting through December and then the final condition as it is represented in the Appendix H.

The work essentially developed through an interest in the title I had selected in my proposal to MCC; the title being determined by the presence of the text pieces I had been working on at the time (Fig. 12.). One was a charcoal drawing with the word UNQUEST filling the top portion of the sheet, the other being the word LOGIC which I constructed out of laminated composition board. The image was intended to suggest my observations and opinions about deficiencies in the governmental sphere, i.e. between what is "represented" and what is "reality," which in this context is a rather disconcerting undertaking.

The first state of the project presented a central blue rectangle which contained the image of a female nude, her arms outstretched toward her head (Fig. 13.). Her expression lies somewhere between deadpan and a smirk. This image is framed within a field of yellow kite nylon. At the top edge the word LOGIC was positioned perpendicular to the viewer. Above this word rested a 6" yellow and aluminum duct; a red, white and blue cloth spilled from one end while a grenade spiralled from the other end of the tube. This assemblage of information set up an odd proposition. What was the logic in the figure's circumstance? The captured moment could be "backyard frolic" or a highly aggressive act, the later further suggested by the volatile presence of the teetering grenade. The vulnerability of the images, here, are at odds with the
Fig. 12. Work in progress
Fig. 13. Work in progress
demanding, lofty ideals of the meaning of LOGIC. This state remained for approximately two months. During this stasis period, what Dennis Oppenheim would consider "stewing around", I was trying to select elements that would relate and extend the curiousness of this image. I eventually chose the dinosaur image used in "Inside the Looking Glass". The image was an embodiment of the comedic and the tragic. Likewise, it too had outstretched arms, however, the expression was one of jubilant elation. The image as an artifact of our time projects pure Disney attitudes, the creature quite unaware of its historical destiny. The second and final state presented this large scale dino in a romper roomish composition which appeared to contain blocks and ovals of letter forms, the entirety spelling CHARMS. In the central blue rectangle, the former female figure was replaced with a drawing representing a 15th century piece of foot armor. This decapitated foot visually seems to be applying pressure onto the dinosaur's back, perhaps by the presence of an overarching logic. There also seems to be a cause and affect dilemma; for as the creature pushes the word CHARMS off the bottom of the format, it resurfaces from behind and will soon register its presence. This suggests that for every action there is an inherent reaction, be it pleasurable, distasteful, complacent, obscene? This image embodied my feelings about the current socio-political environment. There does appear to be a grave difference between our governmental representatives stated intentions and the reality of their decisions. I perceive the totality of the work as a screen, where images and actions are presented for public scrutiny. It may pose the general question of what defines illusion and likewise reality. In today's climate, the overt reality of the illusion is becoming blatantly visible.
CLOSING REMARKS

During the course of this work, it became evident that in my effort to isolate contradictory conditions, I have realized that those experiences are not at all the exception but rather the norm.

Within the context of art, the artist must come to terms with illusion, and consequently the reality of that illusion, to whatever degree that reality can be discerned. Likewise, in one's day-to-day experience, these same subtle conditions are in operation. This body of work has been about a production of illusions, illusions that at their core collectively comment on a reality as I have seen it.
APPENDIX

Documentation of Works

A  "Blush", 1991, Velour, offset poster, wood, and object, 20 x 26"

B  "The Puppeteer (After Charles Keating)", 1991, Copper, canvas, 60 x 60"

C  "Swing Low Sweet Chariot", 1991, Wax on canvas, copper, rope, and rubber casters, 51 1/2 x 72"

D  "The Plight of the Urban Specialists", 1991, Color print, steel, 9 x 20"

E  "VALUE", 1991, Copper, 28 x 38"

F  "Puck's Daydream", 1991, Copper leaf on canvas, copper, nylon, ink, and matte mylar, 60 x 84"

G  "Inside the Looking Glass", 1991, Aluminum leaf, oil, wax, and nylon on canvas, color print, black and white photostat, 72 x 132"

H  "Unquestionable Logic....Unspeakable Charms", 1990-91, Ink, matte mylar, canvas, nylon, wax, oil, wood, and objects, 118 x 137"
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