Mental pictures drawings and objects

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Many artists of the 20th century have prophesied a world in which symbols will eventually replace alphabetic language as the most accurate and effective means of communicating in our increasingly technological world. Ever since the appearance of Sanskrit, the world’s earliest known phonetic language, symbols have often been viewed as an awkward and cumbersome way to describe the world around us. While pictographic languages such as Hieroglyphics require an infinite number of symbols that increase proportionately to the numbers of objects in the material world, phonetic languages utilize a restricted and oral alphabet in order to describe the minute details of everyday life (fig. 1). In picture-writing, the images themselves “constitute their own language...the writer and reader may use words to describe and interpret the pictorial message, but the message is not wedded to any particular set of words,” as it would be in an alphabetic language.¹ By the standards of phonetic writing, pictographic language often appears both imprecise and open to discursive interpretation. In my current body of work, Mental Pictures, I hope to explore the confusing and often humorous terrain of our culture as the pictographic language of the digital age threatens to subsume language and permanently alter history as we know it.

In spite of their contingent nature, pictographic symbols have often played an important role in society throughout history. They have served importantly, and often controversially, as religious icons, trade-marks, secret codes, public displays for advertising, and universal signage to convey information across linguistic barriers. Over the last century, technology has brought us more symbols than the rest of history combined. They have been brought to us through the invention and popularization of photography, cheap printing, television, motion pictures, fax machines, and now, most significantly, computers and digital media. The challenge of revealing the power of symbols in the 20th century has been taken up by many artists whose work has influenced this current project. Before delving into my work, I would like to briefly discuss some of these artists in order to provide a broader historical context for my project.

In the early part of this century both the Dadaists and the Futurists recognized the impending transformation of language into the symbolic realm. The political posters made by the futurist Marinetti in the early part of the century transform text into symbols in order to challenge the construction of meaning in a violent culture dominated by mechanical reproduction (fig. 2). Duchamp and Man Ray reflected rather amusingly upon the blurring of lines between word and images in their Rotoreliefs of the 1930’s (fig. 3). As their disks

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¹ For a discussion of picture-writing see: Boas (1927).
spin with the help of a rather flimsy mechanical device, nonsensical constructions of words blend into abstract geometric backgrounds, making the texts absolutely impossible to decipher. Before these pieces inevitably break down due to faulty mechanisms, the words themselves become lost in the blur of the offset printed designs on the front. More recently, the work of Jasper Johns recognized the tremendous importance of these symbols by asking us to “look at, rather than through” language in order to locate meaning (fig. 4).  

By isolating the alphabet in his letter and number paintings Johns re-imbues language with ritualistic meaning by equating them with the symbols of pre-literate cultures.

The Pop Artists predicted the enormous impact reproductive technologies would have on our personal iconography’s by utilizing these very same techniques in their artwork. By creating multiple silkscreens, Warhol successfully distilled the political complexities of an entire decade into one graphic representation, the head of Jackie Onassis (fig. 5). This image alone became the “archetypal image that crystallized American political and social history.”

Roy Lichtenstein, on the other hand, incorporated the benign dot pattern and the cartoon bubble into his paintings in order to remake the artistic canon according to the present-day stylistic conventions of mass-production and popular culture. Paintings fabricated in this style, such as his classical remake Study for Temple II, for example, evoke an interesting paradox (fig. 6). On the one hand, they poke fun at the canon by “reducing his subject matter to stylistic absurdity.” On the other hand, the very subject matter itself seems overwhelmingly pre-occupied with maintaining the legitimization of the canon in spite of technological changes. By specifically isolating the recognizable elements of the great masterpieces, Lichtenstein’s paintings become “elevated to the status of signs”, and in turn start to reveal the making of stereotypes in industrial culture.

During this time the minimalists starting using industrial fabrication techniques to create tautological works that shut out the “din and cacophony of [their] sensory overloaded world.” The conceptual artists adopted similar reductive strategies in order to address more specifically the philosophical relationship of language to contemporary life. Taking linguistic theory as their point of departure, conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth made work that directly addressed the disparity between text and image. In Kosuth’s famous piece, One and Three Chairs, he places a chair, a picture of a chair, and the definition of “chair,” in a line against the wall (fig. 7). In this piece he asks us to participate in determining which item is actually “real.”
This juxtaposition forces us to confront the fact that the object is perhaps no more “real,” than either its description or its image. Language and visual symbol become interchangeable.

Located somewhere uncomfortably between the Minimalists and the Conceptualists lies the work of Sol Lewitt. While Lewitt’s sculptures and wall drawings often look like Minimalist art, they are more concerned with the social and philosophical ideas of the conceptual artists than the minimalists’ etymologically-driven questions about the nature of “truth in art.” Relying on geometrical forms as the building blocks of his work, Lewitt literally transforms written instructions into symbolic forms. In his early Language Drawings, for example, Lewitt logically forms words into sentences that describe their exact location on the page. These pieces suggest the difficulty of transforming symbols into language while at the same time act as “wry commentaries on technical language, including the impenetrable texts written about conceptual art.”

Claiming Muybridge as one of his major influences, Lewitt works in a serial and repetitive manner that seems a “perfect example [of] the machine which makes art and a sort of language.” His Wall Drawings are all created by crafts people according to explicit instructions and maques provided by Lewitt (fig. 8). While Lewitt plans these pieces in advance, he always allows, and embraces, the irrationality of the collaborative effort. According to Lewitt, “irrational judgments lead to new experience...irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.” At the same time they also take a political stance by defetishizing the aesthetic object itself. Most interesting to me, however, is the fact that Lewitt engages in a philosophical dialogue about art-making with his audience while concomitantly creating truly expressive paintings that reference real world experience.

Two German photographers often interpreted in the context of the Minimalist and the conceptualist art movements, the Bechers, have had a tremendous influence on my work for years. By exhibiting serial grids of industrial structures, the Bechers’ work acts as both an index and exploration of our changing industrial society. While their seemingly straightforward approach reveals a rigorous adherence to formal concerns, the resulting works manifest the ways in which technological developments influence cultural practice. By emphasizing the research process, images such as Blast Furnace Heads, successfully transform banal industrial objects into cultural icons loaded with historical significance (fig. 9). They also allow us entry into their anthropomorphic qualities and in turn “allow us to identify with the individuality of structures [by conveying] qualities of beauty and humor.”

Both Jennifer Bartlett and Eva Hesse systematically approach their artistic media...
with the hope of yielding irrational results. Once again, both of these artists engage in serious notational research which mimic the habits of the engineer. While Hesse kept extensive notebooks outlining her future paintings and drawings, Bartlett employed mathematical systems from the start as a means of “getting work done.” By applying these artificial systems to their artwork, I believe that both artists eventually arrived at a place in which their artwork transcended their written instructions. Hesse, on the one hand, used these plans to eventually create iconic drawings and sculpture which mirrored their mechanistic beginnings. Her drawings from the early 60’s, for example, are described by Lucy Lippard as “shapes organic in source, humorously combined with machine appurtenances, joints, nozzles, rims, cords.”

These drawings were the predecessors of her more well-known sculptures in which she combines industrial debris in a minimalist manner that often symbolically allude to sexual and psychological states (fig. 10). Like Hesse, Bartlett’s linguistic systems also led to the discovery of her signature style; the steel plate fabricated into graph paper. By systematically applying model paints to these modular units, Bartlett’s work often mirrors the pixelated screen of the computer. In the piece *Chicken Tracks*, Bartlett specifically references the paradoxical terrain of the digital world by giving us chaos out of order and reality out of a virtual world of abstractions (fig. 11).

A loose grouping of artists calling themselves the Neo-Geo movement emerged in the eighties in an attempt to challenge the symbolic order of signs multiplying in conjunction with digital technologies. The founder of this group, artist and critic Peter Halley, posited this movement within an environment he described as one in which “hard geometries [of the industrial revolution] have given way to the soft geometries of interstate highways, computers, and electronic entertain-ment.”

Influenced by the writings of both Foucault and Baudrillard, their work undertakes a deconstructive critique of geometric form in our public iconography. Drawings such as *The Block*, by Bernard Tschumi juxtapose human behavior (walking), with the regimented and gridded streets of the modern city in order to critique the geometric imperatives advanced by the Bauhaus movement and currently embraced by the corporate world (fig. 12). By reducing human behavior and living space to diagrams, much of this work alludes to the negative aspects of living in a technocratic world.

The work of these artists also recognizes the often duplicitous nature of digital technologies by visually incorporating the same seductive symbolism they attempt to critique, as described by Peter Halley in the following paragraph.
We are today enraptured by the very geometries that once represented coercive discipline. Today children sit for hours fascinated by the day-glo geometric displays of video games...as adults we finally gain access to participation in our cybernetic hyperreal, with its charge cards, answering machines and professional hierarchies...we can play the corporate game, the investment game, or even the art game.13

The paintings of Ross Bleckner, for example, dazzle the viewer with their optically lush applications of color and symbolism (fig. 13). Often regarded as meditations on the nature of death, especially in the age of AIDS, his paintings reflect the human impulse towards transcendentalism in troubled and destructive times. The circuit paintings of Peter Halley emit a similar mysticism in their dazzling use of color, especially gold and flourescents. In Halley’s work, however, we see the geometric form of the circuit employed as a simulation of a world in which all reality has been reduced to a system of abstract signs (fig. 14). Halley’s work embodies the notion that we live in a “hyperreal” world in which all referents have been destroyed and replaced by fallacious geometric signifiers of meaning.

The age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials—worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions, and all combinatorial algebra.14

Since the 1970’s Matt Mullican has been creating symbols that simulate catalogues of everything from domestic objects to cosmology (fig. 15). Many of these symbols have been rendered as mass-produced objects and then placed back into the context of the real world as an exploration of the ways in which the viewer completes meaning based on personal experience.

Means of representation from the applied arts provides a way of realizing signs, extending them to specific contents of experience...by using these different objects, he represents social relationships which form the basis of our assimilation in, or orientation to, reality.15

While Mullican continues to explore the geometric terrain of the Neo-Geo artists, the self-conscious placement of his symbols outside of the gallery more successfully deconstruct the meaning of geometric
forms in our everyday lives. By juxtaposing his banners, for instance, with the signage of the real world, Mullican immediately reveals the ways in which symbols of commercial culture subtly infiltrate our subconscious mind. They also draw attention to the ubiquitous presence of symbols in our industrial landscape by appropriating the already established iconography of the corporate world. In a series of banners made for a public installation in Paris, for instance, he uses the AT&T globe logo as a representation of what he calls the World Unframed. This banner ironically uses the visual strategies of the corporate world in order to reflect upon our growing global economy, as companies now spend “millions of dollars developing or changing the picture sign by which it will be identified to millions of customers.”16 As multinational companies continue to grow, we start to see a shifting of national boundaries based on economic expediencies. On the one hand, symbols offer an effective way to communicate between nations whose phonetic languages often differ greatly. Paradoxically, they also further advance the technocracy by manipulating consumers on an international scale.

Throughout his career, Bruce Nauman has also recognized the power of signs in our everyday lives. By preempting vernacular devices for his own creative explorations, he provides us with a witty and somber reminder of the ambiguity of language. In his neon pieces, called specifically “signs” and not sculptures, Nauman transforms words into abstract symbols that obfuscate their original meanings. His piece, *My Last Name Extended vertically 14 Times*, addresses the audience in a direct way through the clarity of its construction, the neon tubing (fig. 16). It also, however, dramatizes “the abstraction inherent in identifying objects and ideas with words”17 by rendering his last name illegible through its elongation. The wide range of materials Nauman employs reveals both his participation in the “history of form,” as well as reflects the diversity of cultural obsessions inherent in his work, ranging from the linguistic and the political, to the psychological, social and philosophical.18

Like the Minimalists, Felix Gonzales-Torres also recalls the tenets of modern capitalism, namely repetition and reproducibility, as an invitation for us to participate in the construction of meaning. His work reveals a struggle with the “information explosion, and his attempts to reshape this huge mass of material through its relationship with his own lived experience.”19 He accomplishes this goal by translating the abundance of information in our world into personal narratives that involve the audience as collaborator. In *Untitled*, 1989, for example, Torres displayed a black billboard on Christopher street, above a cigar store, with the words “People with AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969,” printed in relatively small letters at the bottom of the sign (fig. 17). The words them-
selves refer enigmatically and abstractly to the history of the area, most specifically its involvement in the Gay Rights movement. The emptiness of the black area at the top, meanwhile, invites us to place an image of our own devising above these politically suggestive words, recognizing once again the contingency of meaning in language. This work subverts the customary objective of the billboard by imbuing the site with an ambiguity that contradicts the conventional aims of advertising. At the same time it draws our attention to the fact that perhaps language plays a duplicitous role in the advancement of political and economic agendas.

Torres does not, however, cynically regard the mass-production of commercial objects as a permanent threat to our happiness. Pieces such as his candy and paper stacks manipulate modern-day excess in a way which ultimately rescues us from the alienating mechanisms of contemporary life, including everything from factories to our cultural institutions themselves (fig. 18). The stark and pristine execution of the pieces themselves further this notion by appealing to both our romantic and whimsical sensibilities. In my opinion, the inherent dualities of his work, as well as that of all the aforementioned artists (public/private, political/personal, intellectual/emotional, systematic/chaotic), ultimately averts the charge of pedantry attributed to a lot of artists playing in the forest of signs.

As the first half of this paper has probably made clear, I’ve spent the last couple of years looking seriously at the work of many contemporary artists engaged in a visual dialogue with language. My current work straddles the line between the fictional worlds of literature (my undergraduate major) and my more pragmatic forays into adulthood trying to support myself in our increasingly technological world.

Upon graduation from college I sought out a curatorial position in photography. When this proved to be an impossible way to make a living, my interest in images and words led me naturally to the computer. I spent four years after college earning my living as a graphic designer while making photographs of urban landscapes on the side (fig. 19, 20, 21). While I didn’t realize it at the time, this period of my life was overshadowed by the oppressive architecture of the city. I worked in claustrophobic office buildings during the day, and tried to live in tiny apartments in bad neighborhoods at night. The photographs I made during this period of my life are best described in the overly dramatic words of Peter Halley, in reference to the Robert Smithson’s photographs of Paramus New Jersey, as “geometric monuments of the enlightenment transformed into instruments of sadomasochistic confinement and torture.”20 Eventually safety issues led me to pursue escorted visits to public works sites around the city. This began my journey into the world of research that has informed my images ever since.

When I came to Rochester I continued to pursue industrial photography for awhile. For the first review I made a series of pictures that attempted to rewrite the history of the world around

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industrial refuse (fig. 22, 23). By imposing pseudo-historical texts directly onto my photographs, I hoped to remake history according to my own personal associations between industrial and historical relics. In my opinion these attempts failed to be more than one liners, and I quickly started a project informed by my new suburban setting, the growing hype around computers, and my extensive study of contemporary art, inspired by my re-entry into graduate school.

This project appropriated the first mass-produced video-game, Pong, and inserted it into a dialogue with conceptual art. First I used the computer to recreate the font used in the original game created by Nolan Bushnell in 1972. Then I recreated 10 Pong screens on a large scale and installed them around the periphery of a studio (fig. 24). Accompanying these images was the original sound split by a four track into the left and right speakers of a stereo. This piece subverts the original aims of the minimalists by translating a relic of my childhood into the “central, frontal, regular, repetitive, black, empty” format of an Ad Reinhardt painting (fig. 25). These images re-examine the purpose of art by suggesting that artists no longer bear the responsibility of finding “higher truth,” but instead, reveal the ways in which technology informs cultural practice and perception.

When automatism frees millions of hours for leisure, art should gain rather than diminish in importance, for while art is not just play, it is the counterpoint to work. The time may come when art is everyone’s daily occupation, though there is no reason to think that this activity will be called art.21

In the above paragraph Lippard aptly describes the prevailing attitudes of today’s society in which desktop computing often masquerades as art practice. This attitude manifests itself in the relationship between rapidly shrinking art budgets and the skyrocketing sales of video games and entertainment. In 1993 Time magazine reported that “video-games rake in $5.3 billion a year in the U.S. alone...globally, game revenues...
exceed $10 billion each year.” Meanwhile, arts organization and galleries are shutting down in droves across the country.

We live in a world that clearly holds digital entertainment in much higher esteem than art. With this in mind, I’ve continued to explore the conceptual boundaries of digital technologies in my work in the hope of inviting my audience to meditate on these issues through both humor and beauty, rather than political pedantry alone.

Excited by the reductionist qualities of Pong, and too greatly discouraged by the weather to continue photographing outside, I started using the computer to convert art history into a series of symbolic drawings that remake the history of art as stick figures. The source for all of this work is Gardner’s famous art history survey textbook *Art Through the Ages* (fig. 26). The first drawings I made for this project were the *Stick Figure Masterpieces*. In these pieces I reduced the canonical paintings and sculptures of Western Art to their most recognizable forms and coupled them with contemporary slang, as a humorous comment on literacy (fig. 27, 28). With the flood of images currently in our lives it’s easy to “mistake knowledge and the image field used in managing it, for information” and vice versa.22 These drawings counteract the overabundance of images in our lives by imposing a minimalist framework over images laden with historical significance.

For the next review I also made a little detour into the realm of popular culture, making popular icons into stick figures. I quickly gave up this idea as I decided that I am more interested in pictures about pictures that the furthering and revealing of cultural stereotypes.

When it came time to begin my thesis, I decided to give up the textual accompaniment, as it always seemed a little forced, but I returned to an exploration of art history, as it seemed more laden with multiple readings than popular culture by itself. At this point I started to see if I could create symbols based on the history of art that also referenced contemporary culture all-in-one, much in the way that a corporate logo stands in for the larger idea of a company. The stick
figure and symbolic form are the visual language of the non-artist and artist alike. They are also the tools of children, universal signage, and “primitive” cultures. By reducing the history of art to abstraction, I hoped to show the ways in which “high-art,” mirrors and informs popular culture. In the end, all of the art genres I’ve chosen to symbolize (battles, sex, architecture, landscape, and still life) reference abstractly the violence, sex, environment, and economic issues featured every night on television.

With the help of Roland Barthes’ methodology for “reading” photographs, as outlined in Camera Lucida, I started to remake the history of art into symbols based on its appearance as photographic reproductions in books. In Camera Lucida, Barthes deduces a dualistic formula for reading pictures that includes the “studium” and the “punctum.” Studium refers specifically to the pleasure we elicit from a photograph based our ability to place it within a historical, political or philosophical framework; what he calls “an average effect [derived] from a certain training, including a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment.”23 Punctum, on the other hand, refers to the irrational bliss one feels when looking at a photograph that stems from its relationship to the viewer’s personal background. “Punctum is a cast of the dice...that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”24 This philosophical system allows Barthes to explain why two viewers respond differently to the same photograph by expanding the criteria by which we judge images to include the randomness of private experience. By choosing to execute my drawings according this model of interpretation, I hope to reflect, often whimsically, upon the contingent nature of symbols in contemporary life.

As our society commits to a digital model of the world, I want to analyze the history of representation according to these new conventions. Just like postmodern artists such as Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince have employed the visual strategies of mass media (bold graphics and billboard imagery) in order to deconstruct it, I thought it was important to exploit the conceptual potential of the computer in order to make my work (fig. 29, 30). The computer possesses characteristics absent from more traditional drawing tools, and it was these attributes that led me to implement it in the production of this work.

The computer interface itself provides the perfect model for this pursuit, as it relies solely on its icons to communicate with the user and in turn “gives a renewed prominence to the long discredited art of writing with pictures.”25 Both the Macintosh system software and Windows “speak” to their users through cutesy desktop icons (fig. 31). In order to become computer literate, we must learn the meaning of these icons and incorporate them into our visual vocabularies. In my drawings I’m creating symbols that function as mnemonic devices for the learning of art history rather than, say word-processing or spreadsheets.
Classical rhetoric often employed the model of a visual garden in which different ideas are stored in the brain according to their relationship to pictorial images stored in the brain. In keeping with my thesis that symbols function discursively, rather than logically, however, I don’t want these symbols to function exactly in correlation with their referent.

Unlike the trashcan on the Macintosh desktop, I want my symbols to provoke questions rather than tell the audience what to do. Using the floor plans of the great cathedrals as a point of departure, for example, I’ve tried to make connections between history and contemporary life. With a bit of artistic embellishment, for example, the Salisbury Cathedral starts to take on characteristics of a gun, while Chartres nostalgically refers to a more naive version of 50’s America complete with an ice cream soda for two (fig. 32, 33).

In Untitled (Landscapes), the first known landscape, a wall drawing from Catal Hyuk, looks more like a contemporary Nam June Paik wall of TV monitors than a volcano, while a normally tranquil Southwest landscape alludes to the religious mythology of the underworld. In Untitled (Battle Scenes), the hanged man of Goya’s Tampoco becomes a woman clutching her pocketbook, while the Argonauts resemble Batman (fig. 34-37). In all of these symbols, and many more, I’m asking the audience to complete the meaning based on their own cultural and personal experiences, rather than accepting the status quo as advanced by the technocracy, as would be the case with Windows 95, for example. As David Bolter says, “the computer vacillates between intuitive and highly abstract modes,” and in turn imbues its icons with hermeneutic qualities.26

The computer also lends itself well to quotation, and in turn, seems well suited to the act of “making art about art.” First, it allows me to create seamless
line drawings by eliminating erasure marks with its handy undo commands. In *Picture Theory*, WJT Mitchell speaks about the visual qualities of “metapictures,” and their ability to encourage dialogue “between interpretations of said picture.” He cites, for example, the simple duck-rabbit line drawing made famous by Wittgenstein that throws the notion of visual objectivity into question. In this drawing you may be looking at a duck or you may be looking at a rabbit. Regardless of what you see, pictures such as these “reveal the presence of a mind’s eye, interpreting pictures, seeing different aspects of them.” The name of my thesis show, *Mental Pictures*, refers to a model of perception in which the brain and eye together must complete meaning.

In *Untitled (Still Lives)*, I’ve reduced a staple of the still life genre, dead fowl and dead rabbits, to a symbol that humorously alludes to the duck/rabbit paradigm, by literally, turning it on its head (fig. 38). These black and white drawings also emulate Rorschach tests and in turn engage the viewer in a dialogue about cultural stereotypes and expectations.

In *Untitled (Sex Positions)*, for example, I’ve attempted a reinterpretation of the Roman Fresco from “Villa of the Mysteries”(fig. 39). In my drawing I converted the dancing Roman figure depicting the rites of the pre-Christian mystery cults into a dominatrix, or a powerful female figure. In my opinion, this enigmatic fresco always warranted more attention than Gardner afforded it in *Art Through the Ages*, by representing one of the first, and only examples of sado-masochism in the history of art. By rendering this drawing in a rudimentary style, I hope to ironically open the interpretation to include at least any and all of the above interpretations.

The memory capability of the computer also encourages the copying and storing of libraries of imagery for our own individual needs. Our participation in the act of image manipulation destabilizes the notion of authorship, and in turn threatens the very foundation of capitalist society by circumventing a fundamental economic precept; copyright law. Ideally, but unlikely, this could lead to the democratization of art by putting visual power into the hands of everyone with a computer. For a nominal fee these days, anyone can buy bitmapped or simple vector-graphic clip art at their local computer store and incorporate it into their own work (fig. 40). I want my work to reference this store-bought, canned art, and for this reason also, I chose to render my work as black & white vector drawings; the least memory intensive and least expensive graphic form currently available. By translating “famous” works of art into these simple graphics I suggest that canonical wisdom “never comes into the world purely transparent and disembodied,” but rather through the mediation of economic and cultural expediencies. This work comments somewhat cynically on a future in which the construction of meaning will be largely dependent upon those with access to the greatest amount of artificial memory; most likely the very same companies developing it for a profit.
With the recent acceptance of digital media by the commercial world, these drawings also translate easily to other media. I agree that symbols are "best shown in display mode." I quickly discovered while making this work that almost every type of commercial fabricator would gladly transfer my drawings to any possible object I could imagine. I finally decided on three formats in which to display this work that best accommodated both my ideas and my budget: signs, miniatures, and photographs. These three forms move my icons from the public to the private realm, with the hope of engaging the audience on a multitude of experiential levels.

With the regulation street signs, I reflect upon what I see as a growing trend in our culture towards a general perception that life imitates art, rather than the Aristotelian reversal. According to a very recent NY Times survey, 55% of adults in this country attribute teenage violence to portrayals of violence in movies and music. This figure demonstrates the enormous power Americans ascribe to art. It also confirms Baudrillard's predictions when he says that we live in a world in which simulation has destroyed the "distinction between true and false, real and imaginary."

Over the last two years I've spent an enormous amount of time on the highway driving back and forth in order to look at art and work in NYC. Bored out of my mind on these drives down Rt. 17, I realized that most Americans spend a lot more time reading street signs than looking at art. By making my symbols into signs and placing them around the campus and parking lots of RIT, I hope to encourage a microcosm of our culture, the academic community to, in the words of Bruce Nauman,"Pay Attention! to art." While their context by no means guarantees a captivated audience, the institutional space of the RIT campus encourages mental digression at every turn. Whether driving up the long driveway, or walking from the huge parking lot to the buildings, the signs function as a humorous, if not educational break from the empty horizon and architectural monotony now occupying this former swampland. They also seem a logical extension of my previous landscape work by allowing me to further my satirical exploration of the landscape. While in my previous work I tried to draw visual parallels between history and the contemporary landscape, this work even more graphically makes these visual connections through the actual alteration of the landscape itself.

At the entrance to River Rd., near the Red Barn, sits a symbol representing a Dutch landscape (fig. 41). The placement of this sign calls on the audience to notice the similarities between Holland in the 16th century, and Rochester today. In spite of vast technological changes in the world, we still continue to romanticize our agricultural origins. For this reason, the Red Barn has remained on campus in spite of the fact that it exists as an empty signifier, bereft of its fertile land, farm animals and field workers. Now it provides the Outing Club with a simulated environment in which students practice rock-climbing on wooden walls.

At the top of V-Lot is a symbol for the kitschy sunrise/sunset images made famous by photographers such as Joel Meyerowitz (fig. 42). Sandwiched between the photo building and the parking lot over-
looking the horizon, it ironically suggests the absurdity of teaching landscape photography in an institution when the real world lies right outside its doors. Paradoxically, I would also like to believe, however, that the geometric qualities of the symbol itself suggest something ineffable beyond a mere institutional critique. As kitschy as they may have become, sunrises and sunsets still signify the cycles of nature, and if hard-pressed, most of us still believe in their redeeming qualities.

These signs also attempt to bridge the gap between the arts and sciences at a school well-reputed for both, but often experiencing departmental conflict from within. The sign located in E-Lot represents the sword blades painted in Uccello’s famous painting The Battle at San Romano (fig. 43). This painting represents a transitional time in the history of art as artists were beginning to perfect the science of perspective drawing that has since come to represent the Renaissance. By placing this sign in the center of the parking lot, I hope to locate RIT at a similar juncture between the study of art and science. Immediately upon my arrival at RIT I noticed a good deal of tension between the schools of art and sciences. With this sign I would like to suggest a more harmonious union of the two schools in the future, especially in an age so dependent upon the meaningful and creative implementation of technology.

These signs also situate the university campus amongst some well-known mythologies, in order to elucidate its function in contemporary society. At the exit of Lomb Memorial Drive, for instance, I’ve placed a sign that depicts the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, made famous by Massacio (fig. 44). Visually, this sign references the “people crossing” signs we see everywhere. By placing this sign at the exit to the school I’m literally asking drivers to watch out for naked people hiding their genitals and exiting the campus. This sign metaphorically posits the campus as Eden in relation to the real world. It exemplifies how culture often idealizes college as our last bastion of freedom before entering the real world as an adult. It also points to the general perception that universities tolerate naive intellectual pursuits untainted by the competition of the business world.

I’ve also incorporated a number of visual puns into these signs in order to index the personal experiences we bring to bear on the signs around us. “Through [visual] punning, the symbol bears the weight of a thousand words on all sides of its histo-
ment of every scene of misapprehension.”32 Placed next to the stop sign, in front of G-Lot I’ve placed a symbol derived from Birkerts’ famous Federal Reserve Bank (fig. 45). The average person looking at this sign will probably notice its resemblance to a guillotine, not the allusion to a bank. While the reference may be vague, I think that just about every student (and professor), can relate to the feelings of distress that accompany the financial burdens of university life. Ever since the French Revolution, the guillotine has signified the destruction (beheading) of authoritarian rule. With the placement of this sign in the center of campus, I’m hoping to equate this revolution to the student discontent that accompanies rising educational costs and declining educational quality.

In the gallery I’ve placed eight large photographs that display all of my symbols in groups according to their specific artistic genre (fig. 46, 47). In my opinion, these symbols always seemed an extension of photography in that they are “profoundly ideological, for they eternalize a moment or instance of the typical in the same way that a [photograph] captures a moment.”33 Like photography, they selectively frame the elements that I think are important in the reproductions of art appearing in Gardner’s “Art through the Ages.” The difference being that they function as “2nd order discourse” that reflects on “1st order discourse,” in other words, pictures about pictures, rather than pictures about the real world. By placing these symbols in dizzying lines I hope to comment upon the self-referentiality and circularity that often results in trying to reduce pictures to language. The resulting “whirlpool” of symbols in these photographs “suggests a way of specifying (or picturing) the multistability effect in a graphic form, what we might call the Vortex Effect”, or what I would call vertigo, a common ailment of contemporary life.34
At the same time, they attempt to aestheticize photo-mechanical reproduction by drawing the audience in through the ethereal qualities of their weightless lines. By using extremely high resolution negatives (3600dpi) made directly from the computer in order to achieve this almost translucent line quality, this work capitalizes on "certain physiological processes in the eye and brain which we are not normally aware of in ordinary vision." To quote Cyril Barret, the main defender of Optical Art in the 50's and 60's, "what at first confronts us is a stable and often monotonous repetition of lines...but as we continue to look it begins to dissolve before our eyes...the lines undulate and patterns which were not there before suddenly make their appearance and as quickly disappear."35 Unlike Op Art, however, the subject of my work encompasses history as well as form. This lends the work a thematic weight often subsumed in Optical Art by its technical wizardry (fig. 48).

The computer's ability to facilitate cutting and pasting also plays into the decorative qualities of this work. Like Warhol's *Cow Wallpaper*, I'm interested in subverting this tradition. On one level these photographs give us a succinct and easy to digest version of art history as ornamentation, as Gautier says in reference to William Morris' wallpaper "a useful encyclopedia to study while waiting for the soup."36 Upon closer inspection, however, some of their content reveals the perversions of sensationalist pop-culture, namely sex and violence, "too pretty to be art, and too outrageous for decoration."37

This consideration of Victorian wallpaper moves us finally to an analysis of the etched Lucite miniatures. In 19th century England, the wealthy were fond of displaying nature samples under glass. In many of these symbols, I reduce art history to symbols that emulate the insect and nature specimens so treasured by the Victorians. The book and hourglass still
life, for instance, becomes a spider, while the Canterbury cathedral resembles a beetle (fig. 49, 50). By metamorphosing the art canon into the shape of specimens, I’m suggesting that we subject the canon to a more rigorous examination. At the same time I’m once again implying that the real world often imitates art, and for this reason, we should not undervalue its importance. I reflect upon the transformational power of art by privileging each of these symbols on a shelf of its own, illuminated from within by a light box.

The Victorians also considered glass to be a purifying substance that maintains the boundaries between the grotesque and the decorative while “maximizing the possibilities of transcendent vision.” By employing Lucite, a faux glass, I’m ironically alluding to the fallacy, or simulation of truth in symbolic language. Miniatures have been regarded historically as emblems of the self, their small scale acting as personal talismans for private contemplation. Contrary to what one might think, this “reduction in dimension does not produce a corresponding reduction in significance; indeed, the gem-like properties of the miniature make these forms especially suitable containers of aphoristic and didactic thought.” Their small scale, furthermore, transfers the construction of meaning to the experiential realm of the individual. In the walnut still life, for example, the symbol resembles a human brain (fig. 51). This symbol implicates the individual’s intellect in the construction of artistic meaning.

The etchings themselves were paradoxically created by a computerized router that lends them a hand-made appearance, as evinced in the varying and imperfect line style. They reflect upon the tenuous status of originality in a digitized world, by embodying the “tension between the uniqueness of the pre-industrial world and the repetition of mass production.” In the revolutionary war ship etching, for instance, the symbol itself suggests our nostalgic longing for Colonial America (fig. 52). Its stylistic execution as a “hand-made” collectible, meanwhile, suggests the rapid commodification of historical objects in our increasingly ephemeral world of digital information.
The resemblance of these objects to trophies further signifies the collection of knowledge one both internalizes and externalizes. By choosing to depict erotic poses from the history of art on the majority of these pieces, I hope to humorously contrast our mental storehouses of private knowledge with the more public display of art collections in both museums and corporate collections (fig. 53, 54). This also translates into the blurring of lines between our public and private lives that accompanies the encroachment of technology.

While I’ve given some interpretations for this work, I would like to conclude by saying that these are by no means the only interpretations of these symbols. Many people have seen things in these symbols that I never realized were there myself, and these interpretations are just as valid, and much funnier, than any I had originally intended. The continued interpretation of these symbols in the public and private spheres rejuvenates the work and furthers the critical analysis of imagery that I see as an increasingly important function of contemporary society.

The End
5Reinhardt, Ad. LA County Museum Retrospective catalog.
8Fairbrother, intro.
9Gary Garrels, Photography in Contemporary German Art: 1960 to the Present, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center), 1992,15.
10Calvin Tompkins, Drawing and Painting, Jennifer Bartlett, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center), 1989, 17.
16Bolter, 50.
18Richardson, 35.
20Halley, The Crisis in Geometry, 86.
22Ong, Knowledge and the Future of Man, (Holt & Rinehart), 1968.
24Barthes, 27.
25Bolter, 46.
26Bolter, 50.
28Mitchell, 51.
29Lanham, 37.
30Stewart, 53.
31Richardson, 24.
32Stewart, 50.
33Stewart, 49.
34Mitchell, 75.
38Stewart, 68.
39Stewart, 43.


