

ART REVIEW

When How It Looks Matters More Than What It Says


'Drawing Time, Reading Time' at the Drawing Center

By KEN JOHNSON

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As you read this, you're probably not paying much attention to what the letters look like. More likely, you're focusing on the words and sentences that the letters spell, and what they are saying. Some artists, however, have made it their business to direct attention to what letters, words, sentences, texts and books look like more or less apart from what they mean. Nine of these are in "Drawing Time, Reading Time," a thought-provoking show at the Drawing Center.

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Emily Dickinson Collection, Amherst College Archives & Special Collections

An envelope Emily Dickinson used to jot down thoughts is displayed in "Dickinson/Walser: Pencil Sketches." It exemplifies writing meant to be legible to the person who produced it, not necessarily to others.

But there's a second, even more intriguing exhibition here called "Dickinson/Walser: Pencil Sketches" that displays handwritten manuscripts by two famous writers: Emily Dickinson and the early 20th century Swiss writer [Robert Walser](#). Together, [the two exhibitions](#) prompt mind-stretching reflection on the complicated relations between writing, communication and reality.

Dickinson wrote drafts of her poems in pencil on torn scraps of paper and the insides of cut-open envelopes. Literary content aside, the examples here resemble grocery lists made by a hurried domestic. It looks as if she were catching poetic inspirations on the fly, jotting them down before they could evanesce.

Walser's texts appear more purposefully formed. He wrote in an antique German on small rectangles of paper and cardboard in letters too tiny to be easily read by naked eyes, and he compressed his words into small, dense blocks of text. Perhaps writing in this manner was a necessary part of his creative process, as if putting letters on paper this way had the effect of concentrating his mind, as ritualistic incantations do.

Whatever their differences, Dickinson's and Walser's manuscripts exemplify a kind of writing meant to be not by others primarily but by the person who produced it. What that sort of writing is not, however, is "asemic," a word for mark-making that resembles writing but actually has no linguistic meaning.

Asemic, elegantly calligraphic works in "Drawing Time, Reading Time" by Pavel Büchler, Mirtha Dermisache and Guy de Cointet are like scat singing, pure visual music. In a similar vein, Nina Papaconstantinou creates a kind of minimalist, visual drone by hand copying onto single sheets all the pages of whole books using blue carbon paper to transfer her handwriting. The illegible, dense field of fine blue marks of one piece represents the entire text of Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber." While not asemic, typewritten works

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of concrete poetry from the 1960s by Carl Andre suggest a form of chanting.

Not to be confused with mystic or surrealistic automatic writing, which is supposed to tap into unconscious depths, asemic writing in art highlights the relationship between “the written word’s communicative transparency on the one hand and visual art’s material opacity on the other,” as the organizer of both exhibitions and the Drawing Center’s curator, Claire Gilman, puts it in her exhibition catalog essay. That in turn invites thought about the nature of meaning itself: Is it some kind of transcendental substance that may or may not be incarnated in some physical form? Is the relationship between meaning and material form like the relationship between your body and your soul?

For some artists in the show, verbal meaning apparently matters, but to what extent is hard to say. In 1993, Sean Landers hand wrote on 451 yellow legal pages an entertaining, autobiographical account of his trials and tribulations as an artist and a pursuer of sexual, romantic and other gratifications. It’s titled “[sic].” All the pages are here pinned up in order in a wall-filling grid. The installation makes it impossible to read the whole and renders uncertain exactly what “[sic]” is. Is it art or literature? Is it to be read, looked at or thought about?

A richer relationship between form and content animates Deb Sokolow’s series of poster-size drawings, “Chapter 13. Oswald and Your Cousin Irving.” Words rendered by large, neatly made letters as well as diagrams and photographic images tell a remarkable story about the assassination of John F. Kennedy and its aftermath. At the start, you learn that Ms. Sokolow had an older cousin who was a mentor to a teenage Lee Harvey Oswald. The drawings go on to ponder mysterious circumstances relating to the assassination, including that [Mary Pinchot Meyer](#), a painter whose diary revealed trysts with Kennedy (she was part of a circle of artists and intellectuals who were exploring psychedelic drugs and [orgone therapy](#)), was murdered less than a year after Kennedy.

The eccentrically forensic style of Ms. Sokolow’s zany project reflects her effort to comprehend the facts and rumors, as if she herself were a justifiably paranoid character in a Thomas Pynchon novel.

The book as a physical object is the ostensible subject of carefully made, realistic pencil drawings by Allen Ruppersberg and [Molly Springfield](#). Like everything else in both exhibitions, they are paradoxical: Writing is material, and, then again, it’s not. Made in the 1970s, Mr. Ruppersberg’s works represent books like Baudelaire’s “Les Fleurs du Mal” and Strunk and White’s “The Elements of Style” lying closed on undefined surfaces. What’s the relationship between what these volumes look like and what they contain?

Ms. Springfield’s drawings are from a 2007 series called “[The World is Full of Objects](#),” whose title refers to the conceptualist Douglas Huebler’s famous statement, “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.” From a distance, they appear to be a grad student’s smudgy, black-and-white photocopies from library books. Up close, you see that they are lovingly hand-drawn copies of photocopies of pages from books about conceptual art of the 1960s, including Lucy R. Lippard’s “Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object.”

What is an object, anyway? Must it be something material? Can a concept be an object? Are words and poems objects? What about sounds, actions and events? If an object exists only in a photograph, is it still an object? Do imaginary objects count? If you allow that a question can be an object, then such queries could be the primary objects of Ms. Springfield’s beautifully realized, brain-teasing drawings.

*Both shows continue through Jan. 12 at the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, SoHo; (212) 219-2166, [drawingcenter.org](#).*

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