

Beth Campbell, Looking At Words

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"Looking at Words: The Formal Presence of Text in Modern and Contemporary Works on Paper" Installation shot. Photo: Christopher Burke.

I am crouched in front of a piece of paper hanging no more than a foot from the ground. At the bottom of the page, written in cursive is the phrase, "I still have a gift certificate to linens and things on my birthday." Two slightly undulating lines lead to the options of going to Linens and Things or staying home and shopping online; from these two, more lines lead to more penciled choices and so on until the top of the page is filled with a number of events and circumstances that have little or nothing to do with shopping or linens by any formal standard.

My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances by Beth Campbell confronts us with the disparity between one's position as a spectator of a final product, and that of a producer engaged in the process leading up to its completion. It both challenges and underscores the omniscience of the viewer by highlighting the unknown convolutions of experience embedded in the art object while simultaneously allowing us to read the whole of this potential future.

Or rather, I would be able to see how all of these options pan out were it not for the onset of a leg cramp and a feeling of self-consciousness at my partially sitting position in a busy and relatively small Chelsea gallery. Positioning the piece that is arguably the most 'narrative' in content this close to the floor is one of many ways in which "Looking at Words" demands that we return our attention to the act of reading and the impact of the context in which it occurs.

A total of 341 unlabeled works ranging from Henry Darger to Jenny Holzer, "Words" takes us on an untitled tour of the artistic canon without, amazingly enough, focusing on the celebrity of the artists. Although the temptation to play the guessing game exists and the lack of labels could easily be construed as a way of separating the knowledgeable from the novice; it ultimately precludes the usual status of the Name as the most valuable piece of information.

This of course was undermined by the fact that a huge number of pieces were on sale and on a Friday evening in Chelsea it was impossible to ignore that this is, in fact, the most important aspect of the work. But in this instance it is worth it to set aside the fact of this gallery/celebrity system and appreciate a truly intelligent retrospective of textual artworks.

Reflected in the arrangement of the pieces on the four walls and on either side of four moveable walls in the center of the gallery—which form a inner chamber devoted to work culled from other print sources—was a sense of the varying levels and forms of intelligibility that has characterized modern and contemporary art. Indeed, the issue of intelligibility itself arises. Not only do we squint and strain at the blacked-out text placed at eye level, we must crane our necks to read what may be perfectly legible if it were not so high on the wall (the show looms—the pieces are as close to the ceiling as they are to the floor).

Thus does "Words" redirect our attention to the disruption caused by text as image; the interruption of our desire for referral to pre-existing extra-textual systems that is affected by the obscured and torn pages of a newspaper is repeated by the physical inaccessibility of clearly drawn words. Language/image is here wrenched, not from its context but from what Gerard Genette referred to as a paratext; information that informs but is not inherent to the text itself—information such as names. But a quick turn of the head brings us back to the perfectly readable ribbon-like letters of Ed Ruscha and we realize that our bodily movements themselves serve as a vehicle for this negotiation between text as image in itself and as indicator of some exterior meaning.