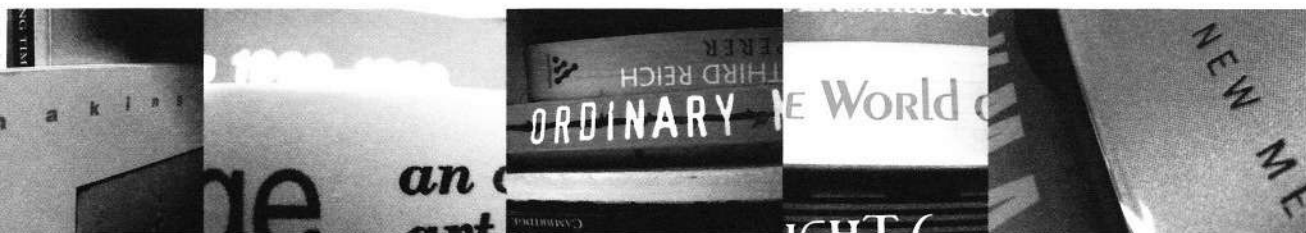


Record Record

Stephanie Snyder

"Words die as they bring forth thought." –Lev Vygotsky



Pat Boas investigates official and unofficial sites of record and forms of information, expanding and contracting the legibility, velocity, and shape of images and texts. At times, Boas transforms pre-existing information systems — newspapers, for instance — into enigmatic serial works. Boas also creates original texts through the careful documentation of her surroundings, utilizing whatever materials seem most suited to the task (graphite, paint, and, more recently, digital technology) to carefully observe, interpret, and construct a poetics of everyday, though tightly edited, language and linguistic forms. Boas' exploration of language, whether conducted alongside images or in a more purely typographical fashion, captures and extends the viewer's mental image and memory of reading and writing (and printing) as an expanded time space — a space requiring considerable attention to absorb, a place of stories grand and mundane, simultaneously forgotten but potentially rediscovered in the act of rereading and remaking — language spaces so common that they disappear in plain sight and become newly *unfamiliar* in Boas' expansive installations. When the artist meticulously dismembers and expands the front page of one issue of *The New York Times* into twenty-six individual drawings, that same newspaper, its coherence dispersed, becomes titrated and distilled like a rare intoxicant or an ancient manuscript.

The origin of the word "record" lies in the concept of remembrance. Boas raises the question of whether one must rerecord experience in order to grasp and retain its meaning and symbolic potency. Within Boas' work the relationship between public and private experience (and space) looms large. How does one understand and mine the potential of the record to re-establish the boundary — the symbolic edge-space — of subjectivity, where poetry resists instrumentality? Space becomes place when it is constrained and organized. Space expands, place collapses. Boas is obsessed with studying both the orderly and indescribable spaces that emerge through the organization of cultural information. In Boas' hands, remembrance becomes an obscuring but universalizing transformative force. Whether penetrating *The New York Times* or exploring the language patterns of domestic and civic spaces, Boas channels place like a medium, filtering and synthesizing signals akin to a Shaker artist receiving and transcribing the wisdom of the divine spirit.

In the drawing series, *All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times, 2001*, Boas traced the outline of every human head appearing on the front page of *The New York Times* from January through December. Boas completed this exercise using brush and ink each day in one-month increments: one delicate silken page, returned to daily for one month, one page per month, collecting the outlines of the living and the dead, the powerful and the impotent. Each month Boas began a new drawing and conducted the project, serially, for one year, completing twelve drawings. As viewers, we cannot easily place or contextualize the empty-faced bodies whose subtle contours and idiosyncratic layering suggest the unfolding of organic, abstracted human forms — like a field of poppies sprouting in an ephemeral eternity of whiteness, or a populous collective drifting within a reassuring yet tenuous emptiness of anonymity. Suddenly, reading *All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times*, we realize that we are certainly studying the bodies of the dead. Boas reminds the viewer that the record of death is an assembly of outlines and letterforms — of ghosts.

The tracings of photographs that comprise *All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times* recalls Roland Barthes' elucidation of meaning in his 1980 book *Camera Lucida*.¹ In this seminal work Barthes describes two primary, contrasting, and productively antagonistic types of significance within the photographic image: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* denotes the cultural, linguistic, and political agency of the photograph; in contrast the *punctum* denotes the wounding, personally touching detail with which the photograph establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within it. Boas' examination of the text/image field of *The New York Times* shapes and shifts the *studium* toward the material and emotional realm of the *punctum*. Boas abstracts the "objective" information on the front of the *Times*, revealing the shape of desire and transcribing an animistic consciousness that embraces the salience of each life, each story, and each set of circumstances while suspending life in the viewer's field of vision.

Alphabet (NYT 01/01/01), created from 2001 through 2002, began innocently enough at a breakfast table bathed in morning light. Boas was inspired to investigate the front page of the *Times* on January 1, 2001, the inception of the millennial year, and a seductively binary date — 010101 — time-encoded and time-enclosed in a perfect numerical sequence, an ideal conceptual framework for dismembering the space of the front page according to its own internal logic, while embracing it in the realm of the *punctum*. In *Alphabet (NYT 01/01/01)* Boas set about systematically creating twenty-six separate silk tissue "drawings" recording each letter of the English alphabet *in situ*. Boas created *Alphabet* by photocopying the *Times*' front page, and then, using solvents, transferring the powdery black printing toner onto silk tissue, separating and rubbing each letter onto the soft receptive silk. The twenty-six resultant drawings are installed unframed and hung in the configuration of a calendar, suggesting the slow reassembly of content through the act of reading. The work suggests an expanded palimpsest that has been laboriously deconstructed according to its unique, internal logic. Typographic hierarchies, from masthead to caption, rise and fall as we scan the sometimes fuzzy and pocked edges and contours of the letterforms. Time appears slowed and somewhat distended through Boas' extension of one day's news through months and months of labor and consideration. This is a work of poetic, phenomenological resonance. The viewer feels Boas' hand and body coursing through the work like

an electrical current. *Alphabet* hums with a psychological intensity resulting from the letterforms' repetitive and somewhat eccentric patterning. The idiosyncratic gestures and incidental marks that surround each hand-transferred letter solicit private, poetic reverie. The viewer is encouraged to read afresh, to become a decoder, a rereader, and a reconstructive poet seduced by the work's careful order.

In a series of highly detailed, nearly photo-realistic gouache paintings entitled *NYT Little People* (2008–09), Boas continues to explore hierarchies of information and meaning directly related to the representation of the human figure in the context of the newspaper. In *Little People*, Boas focused on images of ordinary individuals that she noticed appearing with greater regularity on the front page of the *Times*. Boas reproduced images of people in their original size and location, removing everything else on the page. Isolating these lush yet ordinary narrative moments within a stark white space, Boas raises questions about what is and isn't present on the original page, drawing our attention to the importance of the absence of language as a contextualizing force and a marker of time. In *NYT Little People*, dates and headlines have been shifted to the space of the exhibition label, clearing the artwork itself from the burden of textual description. For instance, one title reads: "June 17, 2008, BOOMING, CHINA FAULTS U.S. POLICY ON THE ECONOMY." Boas' titles (copied exactly from the newspaper) locate us in a time and place that is constantly shifting in relevance and familiarity. *Little People* focuses the viewer's attention on aesthetic information in the form of imagery, as opposed to the textual captions and stories that the reader usually relies upon for knowledge and contextualization. Here the viewer must study the painted human form as a primary source of identification.

Other artists who have used media publications, and specifically newspapers, to memorialize and critique culture, such as Andy Warhol and Nancy Spero, have also selectively reproduced and deconstructed its visual "voice." Warhol, for instance, created diverse photographic silk-screen prints based on advertising imagery, exploring the ephemera of spectacular events and people. Robert Rauschenberg also incorporated newspaper clippings in his combines and prints to ground them in the world of significant current events, where they act as distilled cultural chronicles. Typically, artists exploring such media retain and manipulate the image-text relationship in collage-based forms. Boas, in contrast, consistently separates image and text in her media-related work, prying apart the graphic terms of its construction to poetic ends, working serially over long periods of time, stretching the temporal and physical dimensions of the word-image relationship, and pushing the limits of formal legibility and meaning. Boas' approach differs radically from that of most modern and contemporary artists, who rip, tear, cut, glue, and cast newspapers in innumerable forms of bricolage.

In contrast to work that incorporates popular media as a form of object materiality, it is much more relevant and satisfying to consider Boas' careful formal explorations in relationship to artists such as Agnes Martin and Howardena Pindell (specifically Pindell's meditative geometric work from the 1970s). Both artists methodically explored the formal properties of the artwork as an abstract linguistic space to be distilled for the purposes of observation and revelation. Like Martin and Pindell,

Boas investigates the properties of geometric abstraction as a collection of related parts that elicit striking self-contained systems of representation, systems that catalyze awareness through rigorous and handmade order. Although they are not constructed using text-based forms, the shimmering geometry of Agnes Martin's paintings reminds the viewer of the orderly yet quivering letters in *Alphabet* or the carefully traced heads in *All the Heads on the Front Pages of The New York Times*. In Boas' work, newspapers and other ubiquitous language forms become the properties of a poetic code. Encountering and reading Boas' reconfigured images or texts, the viewer is seized by the impression that they are transmitting esoteric information from a place that is both within the world of the page and far away from the page itself. Hence, sometimes the world-space in Boas' work feels highly cryptic, recalling Martin's work in particular, or a work of poetry, such as that of the Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, who coded poetic language within a synaesthetic universe, as in his poem *Voyelles (Vowels)*, bringing forms of sensual perception into the space of the page and literally describing the letters of the alphabet according to color systems.

Canadian poet Lisa Robertson writes that poetry is experienced most acutely through resistance and dispersal. She writes, "I hold that for me at least poetry is an *unquantifiable* practice. Its *topos*, its place of agency, is invisible, and necessarily so."² Robertson goes on to posit that the closest correlative to this unquantifiable space is the space of friendship, a space inhabited by communal pain, pleasure, and misunderstanding, a space that records but evaporates under the pressure of overdefinition. Boas also addresses language as *topos*, as a place of meeting that hovers somewhere between the page and the reader. Robertson's reference to "friendship" may be interpreted as a space of trust and kinship. By embracing current events within her highly poetic and formal aesthetics, Boas turns our attention to the notion of community and social awareness. Boas asks the viewer to consider whether poetry and art have the capacity to create a symbolic *topos* where forms of communal and unquantifiable companionship and understanding are possible. *Alphabet* and *All the Heads on the Front Pages of the New York Times, 2001*, reauthor places of public record toward the qualities of space that Robertson describes as "unquantifiable." We see in Boas' work a circumscription of mental activity, but what we see is an edge-space of understanding, a diary of aesthetic priorities, a chronicle of a resistance to the velocity of place, and a critique of the relationship between human experience and different forms of economy.

Boas' acts of cultural subterfuge have occurred in other forms of visual exploration. In the series *A3*, Boas worked specifically with page A3 of the *Times*. Before the paper was reorganized, the international news brief was placed on page A3, and Boas noticed that it was consistently sited in close proximity to Tiffany jewelry advertisements bearing a striking formal relationship with characteristics of the international news images. A survey of Boas' *A3* pages is completely arresting and disturbing in its illustration of First World excess and complacency. In each of Boas' *A3* pairings, we are confronted with the uneasy marriage of radically different agendas, cultures, and capital: A poor boy in a derelict dwelling is set next to an advertisement for extravagant diamonds; another young boy lays his head in grief on the wall of a building adjacent to an advertisement for necklaces that mimic the boy's angular gestures. The image pairings are virtually impossible to rationalize or

describe. How was this visual critique created? From the collective consciousness of our shared trauma? Or by a subversive art director or designer at the *Times*?

In *What Our Homes Can Tell Us*, the most recent body of work in the exhibition, Boas turns her attention to the abundance of words and hidden messages lurking in the artist's domestic space and in other locations Boas considers "homelands" for a variety of personal reasons, places such as Krakow, Berlin, and Amsterdam. Photographing and cataloguing over a thousand images of such found words, Boas has begun using them as the raw material for both photographic prints and digital videos. The videos are synchronized to assemble and shift; phrases cohere and evaporate with a rhythm akin to the fluctuations of the mind and body while reading. Boas' visual language constructions feel strangely familiar, like notes on a refrigerator; but they remind us of the far more formal (and unconscious) ways that we are constantly reading the linguistic terrain of our homes, our cities, and the products we buy. The title of the work, *What Our Homes Can Tell Us*, implies that it is through repetition and re-encounter that we begin to notice and incorporate the language that surrounds us.

Regardless of their origins, Boas' words seep out of the world, evidencing the humor and substance of everyday life. A small sample of phrases from the artist's home reads as follows: "Time Pricks Us"; "Chance Watches Over You Safe Until Tomorrow's Past"; and "A Sense Of History And An Unconscious Longing For Beauty Reconfigured Discontent With The Present Making An Ordinary World New."

What *topos* is Boas describing? The artist lists a variety of her sources: "Junk mail, labels on food packages, products and medicines in my kitchen and bathroom, book titles and other printed matter, grocery lists and scribbled notes, the news crawler on the TV screen, labels on clothing, etc. The word-images retain a sense of the original location and context. For example, the word 'power' comes from the control panel of my microwave, the word 'deep' from the label on a bottle of Thai marinade in my refrigerator, the word 'forever' from the cover of a book of postage stamps on my desk." In one sense, *What Our Homes Can Tell Us* transforms the viewer into a voyeur. We witness, and are implicated in, mysterious acts of surveillance along with the artist as Boas tracks her ability to articulate the world.

Poetry is not public. Boas explores poetry as the ultimate space of empty return and of the whole world: of the caesura and the ellipse, of the eclipse. One can never truly remember, never truly record the poetic and the space of the page, as the recordable is a set of decisions established in the service of discourse. Is poetry a record? Poetry is not itself remembrance. Poetry is the space of the indistinguishable, the space of thought, of what is missing, of what dies to return. As Lisa Robertson argues, it is unquantifiable resistance that poetry affords the thinking mind, and Boas has chosen to antagonize both the public space of public opinion and the private space of the domestic in the remaking and removal of language toward the space of poetry, a poetry that flows through the body of the artist. Poetry, language, absence — information recorded becomes record, and the agency of record becomes power. In the age of reproduction, the age of the simulacrum, the recorded is

appropriated toward subversive goals: The already recorded, the mixed tape, the cover, the already re-recorded, and the barely understandable but locatable too become records of implication and hybridization. Considering the relationship between space and language, the French philosopher and novelist George Perec writes in "Species of Spaces":

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbors, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text. Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible simultaneously, anything other than an alphabet?³

The paintings, drawings and prints that Boas has created by interpreting and remaking authoritative sites where image and text converge to define the cultural and emotional landscape (like Perec's ribbon of text defining the coastline) reimagine information and the experience of reading.

Boas' diverse bodies of work do not always resemble one another in conventional ways; they live unbounded by the pressures of coherence. One becomes witness to Boas' preoccupation with certain practices: formality, precision, separation, and isolation. If, as Borges posits, the aleph (alphabet) is a world, one locating us in an infinite present, then Boas has surely created a world with history hovering at the periphery. Pat Boas has spent the last twenty years immersed in comprehension and meaning: exploring, and recording, the fragile skin of subjectivity through the fleeting and ephemeral nature of language.

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1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard, translator (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981).

2 These quotations were taken from a now deleted blog entry by Lisa Robertson, provided to the author by Matthew Stadler in 2009.

3 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, John Sturrock, translator (New York: Penguin, 1997).