

# Rebecca Ripple

*Velvet Involution*



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June 6 – July 4

Kristi Engle Gallery  
Los Angeles, California

## Flesh Made Word: The Ripple Effect

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As someone who combines the professions of writer and visual artist, I am particularly attuned to – and skeptical of – attempts to integrate the two domains. But it's not just personal. The uncomfortable interdependency of textual and visual modes of relating to the world underlies much of the history of our species' attempts at expression and communication. Alphabets originally evolved from simple pictographic record-keeping, but over the centuries became an increasingly exclusive technology used to intimidate the non-literate majority – defining (and often contradicting) their complex multi-sensory experiences of the world with an exponential snowball of deeds, contracts, treaties, and papal bulls.

Visual media played (and continue to play) their part in the establishment and maintenance of these authoritarian symbolic systems, but once photography usurped the proprietary representational function enjoyed by more traditional media for the previous Millennia, it somehow freed up those now obsolete technologies – AKA The Fine Arts – to the possibility of exploring, exposing, and challenging the relationship between verbal and visual languages.

Beginning with Picasso's incorporation of collaged newspaper text in his *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912) and the concrete poetics of the Futurists and Dadaists, and culminating in the linguistically mediated dematerialization of the object of art by the likes of Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner, it is possible to see the entire history of Modernism as a systematic disentanglement of Art's utter dependency on verbal epistemological mechanisms. Possible, but not mandatory.

To me, this trajectory suffers from an unspoken hierarchical ranking that privileges discourse with the last word; it presupposes that visual phenomena can only be understood if they pass through a semantic code. But the very criteria for meaningfulness are contained and defined by the parameters of the code, so any phenomena that fall outside those parameters – ultimately, anything that isn't constructed from words – is declared nonsensical. Anything that can be considered Art must be parseable through words; otherwise it is just noise. About that which one cannot speak, one must remain silent.

More interesting (if lending itself less comfortably to academic art theory genealogies) is the piecemeal history of artwork that maintains a non-hierarchical equivalency between the visual and verbal realms, or even treats verbal language and its components as (undoubtedly unique and potent) material forms belonging to a wide-ranging formal and symbolic vocabulary from which visual art draws. This ranges from the automatist calligraphic surrealism and abstract expressionism of Henri Michaux, Brion Gysin, Mark Tobey, Richard Pousette-Dart and Lee Mullican to the *Literaturwurst* of Dieter Roth, the typographical experiments of Fluxus, Ann



Pablo Picasso – *Still Life with Chair-Caning* – 1912 – Oil and oilcloth on canvas, with rope frame – 27 x 35 cm – Musée Picasso, Paris  
Joseph Kosuth – *One and three Chairs* – 1961 – Wooden chair and 2 photographs – 200 x 271 x 44 cm – Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Dieter Roth – *Literaturwurst* – 1961 – Chopped book, pressed into sausage shape, frame – 20 x 16 x 4 in. – Edition: 50 – Estate of Dieter Roth  
*thighblind* – 2001 – Aluminum, cord, plastic – Dimensions variable

Hamilton's use of discarded lead type as the floor for her 1988 installation *capacity of absorption*, and so on...

All of which I mention as prefatory background to the recent sculptural works of Los Angeles-based sculptor Rebecca Ripple. Ripple's work has been popping up on the LA scene for over a decade, offering precise, idiosyncratic examinations of the incompatibility of subjective sensation and the inadequate linguistic toolbox with which it is habitually reified. Works like *thighblind* (2001) – an off-the-shelf set of aluminum venetian blinds with the word "thigh" cut out (in what appears to be Times-Roman lettering) from the middle dozen or so slats – elegantly conflate the verbal objectification of sexuality with a mundane, suburban form of material fetishism – embodying control over visibility (the "thigh" presumably disappearing when the blind is fully opened), the semi permeability of the domestic threshold, and the unutterable collaborative contract between the exhibitionist and voyeur.

Ripple's earlier works articulate such ambiguous dialectical intricacies with economy and humor, but their emphasis on clarity and reductive formal strategies give them plausible claim to legitimacy in the art-as-a-subset-of-discourse camp. But a recent group of works appears to signal a substantial infusion of chaotic sensual energy into Ripple's oeuvre, effectively blowing her cover.

The breakthrough piece is *tongue (after Rubens)* (2004), in which Ripple arrays multiple renditions of oversized Styrofoam versions of the constituent letters of the title in an arrangement derived from Peter-Paul Rubens' Baroque masterpiece *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* (c 1618). In this work, we first witness Ripple's

Literaturwurst  
Marin Weber (Hawaii)  
Literature sausage  
Marin Weber (Hawaii), 2002  
Chopped book pressed into sausage  
shape and bread, 20 1/2 x 27 1/2 x 4 1/2"  
2002 A - 42.0 - 19 cm

Sausage recipe, by Mark, *Reconstructive Works*, vol. 15, p. 202







interest in the use of Western Christian historical references as symbolic and conceptual elements in her perverse grafting experiments, albeit in a less direct and autobiographical form than would eventually emerge. The Baroque period is known for its extravagant sensuality, dynamic theatricality, and emotional directness – and is considered to have been something of a propaganda campaign by the Catholic Church to forestall the popular acceptance of Protestant austerities.

By reinscribing elements of Rubens' florid depiction of this violent sexual conquest out of Greek mythology (a controversial artifact from a feminist perspective, due in large part to the ambiguity of the painting's erotic tone) onto an accumulation of industrial-minimalist letterforms awkwardly braced by an unfinished lumber support structure, Ripple extends her inquisition beyond the contemporary cultural dichotomy of desire versus determinacy to examine its roots in European history, and – in nascent form – in her own psyche.

**tongue (after Rubens)** – 2004 – Styrofoam, wood – Dimensions variable  
**Peter Paul Rubens** – **The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus** – c. 1618 – Oil on canvas – 88 x 82 7/8 in. – Alte Pinakothek, Munich

**God** – 2006/07 – Patent leather, leather, velvet, lead – Dimensions variable

But the signal shift apparent in *tongue* is in the balance of primacy between verbal and sensual content, implicit in the structural use of Rubens' voluptuarial spatial constructions, but embodied in the fragmentation, repetition, and arrangement of the foam letterforms into a frozen tumultuous cascade of disintegrating legibility, a glacial glossolalia gesture. From this point on, Ripple's work displays greater openness to indeterminacy and intuition, and a concomitant formal confidence – allowing words and aesthetic forms to duke it out amongst themselves: may the best episteme win.

The four works included in *Velvet Involution* – Ripple's solo exhibition at Kristi Engle Gallery in the early summer of 2009 – record the various results of these recent territorial negotiations, and suggest a surprising possible future direction. In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was black velvet and shiny patent leather. *God* (2006-2007) tackles the ultimate unnameable with the affect of unbridled consumer lust and ostentatious







me please me – 2008 – Fabric, paint, plaster, papier-mâché – Dimensions variable

élan, cobbling the freestanding sculptures of the individual letters of title character out of the decadent materials that made up the artist's first-day-of-parochial-school footwear, and displaying them on a luminous pale-green display plinth. Just What Is It that Makes Today's Deity So Different, So Appealing?

The plaid skirting enveloping each discrete but roped-together entity of *me please me* (2008) (which I described elsewhere as “a herd of Loch Ness Laocoon intestinal tripods”) also references Catholic schoolgirl couture, unsuccessfully attempting to contain the oozing fractal eruptions of the surrogate white plaster pods within a geometric genealogical grid, while orchestrating their atomized linguistic branding into a complex syntactical loop that oscillates between narcissism, supplication, and solipsism.

The remaining two works are reconfigurations of earlier pieces. *lang[uage]* (2008-2009) is a ramshackle tour-de-force, overwhelming a generic colonial dinner table with a battery







lang(uage) – 2009 – Linen lace, plaster, papier-mâché, wood, resin – Dimensions variable

of exquisitely irrational structures, including a destabilizing cluster of Rippe's signature two-by-fours and plaster intestines abetted by a plank cast from translucent pink resin (recalling to my mind Philip K. Dick's Gnostic Christian revelation – transmitted in a "pink beam of light" shooting from a delivery girl's Ichthys pendant). The surface of the table – the arena of outward domestic presentation – is almost entirely engulfed in a softly spreading biomorphic plaster corpus covered with a variegated chromatic patina. The only discernible structural differentiation emerging from the mass is a single breast-form, which acts as the central lacuna around which is spread a miraculously intricate piece of lacework (handmade by Rippe over the course of a year) whose pattern resembles a cellular structure metastasizing to spell out the first four letters of the work's title – the remaining "uage" being inscribed directly onto the gallery wall, embedded in a similar pattern, rendered in graphite.







Joos Van Cleve – *Virgin and Child* – c. 1525 – Oil on wood – 28 3/4 x 21 1/4 in. – Metropolitan Museum of Art  
*Flock of Nuns* – 2009 – Fabric, urethane, plated wire – Dimensions variable

Some time could be spent unraveling this work, especially given the artist's indication that it constitutes her translation from a Renaissance "Madonna and Child" motif, but of particular note is the near-invisibility of the verbal component, which must be teased out in a sort of choreographed sidelong examination of the intricate knotwork. In *Flock of Nuns* (2009), the conviction and security of the word is left behind entirely, as Ripple's gilded wire cornice ascends into the powder-blue void. Re-envisioned from a







2008 work entitled *"sure"/lhabit (flock of nuns)*, the delicate architectonic agglomeration of skeletal models of the headdress worn by Sally Field in the 60s sitcom *The Flying Nun* (!) has become completely unmoored from its base, which is no longer a part of the piece: the letters s – u – r – e.

Rebecca Ripple's relationship to verbal language has been too complex – and too fruitful – to suggest that her work has reached a point where words can be abandoned for some kind of post-verbal sublime. But one thing is certain: the course of her work over the last decade has been one of constantly reassessing and readjusting the balance between the claims, reality and perception of the power inherent in verbal and visual language. And it looks like the visual is tipping the scales.

—Doug Harvey



Rebecca Ripple was born and raised on Long Island in New York. She received her BFA upstate New York at Alfred University and her MFA from Yale School of Art.

Ripple has received a COLA Fellowship Grant 2010, the Rebecca Taylor Porter Award for distinction in the Sculpture Department from the Yale School of Art, an Arts Midwest Fellowship, Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, CAAP Grant from Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a full scholarship to Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and a fellowship & residency at the Bemis Foundation.

She has lectured at University of California, Santa Barbara, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, University of Nebraska, the Bemis Foundation in Omaha, Nebraska and Portland State University in Oregon and taught at institutions in and around Los Angeles including UCLA, UC Santa Barbara, CSU Los Angeles, Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, CSU Northridge and Los Angeles City College.

She currently lives and works in Los Angeles.





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