



## ART=TEXT=ART RICHMOND

The fact that *Art=Text=Art: Works by Contemporary Artists* remains necessary and possible as an exhibition title implies that this assertion's opposite still prevails [Joel and Lila Harnett Museum of Art, University of Richmond; August 17–October 16, 2011]. It suggests that the poststructuralists and conceptual artists have not yet inscribed into the collective imagination the notion that a text is anything we might regard as semiotic, and that art encompasses all manner of human activity. “Text” still means “words on a page” and “art” still means “visual art.” Like its title, this thoughtful exhibition both challenges and reinscribes the distinction. It examines the permanently problematic position of the grapheme—the differentiating mark: the distinction between a written or a drawn mark is a matter of perception and attention, at least as much as of intention. Richard A. Lanham 1993 book *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* describes the development of alphabetic literacy as a progression of negotiations between complementary ways of seeing: looking *at* and looking *through*. Looking *at* a written character—say a figure from one of the three Jasper Johns numeral studies in this exhibition—evokes a sensual response. Dwelling on its paradoxes of voluptuous thicks and thins drawn by hand, deep blacks improbably suggest a luminous figure, and apparently indifferent scribbles somehow articulate smooth arcs. Looking *through* the figure reveals not a numeral but a number, an abstraction that materially exists nowhere, but without which civilization is impossible. According to Lanham, in order to become proficient, a reader must learn to see through the marks. But as Mel Bochner declared in paintings at the turn of the 1970s, “Language is not transparent.” And, indeed, to read is to flicker between looking *at* and *through*.

The exhibit comprises deeply engaging work from the collection of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky: contributions by forty-five artists, including Alice Aycock, Trisha Brown, Jane Hammond, Jasper Johns, Sol LeWitt, Ed Ruscha,

Karen Schiffr, Cy Twombly, John Waters, and Lawrence Weiner. The exhibition's website pairs the artists with response texts, which are mostly insightful written commentaries. Nathan Altice's three sound pieces are standouts, treating their subjects loosely as graphic scores and prompting interpretive gestures no words could achieve. Frank Badur's minimalist percussion composition accompanying his *Untitled* postal art, 2005, and a gorgeous audio recording of the process that created Stefana McClure's *Digging (from Death of a Naturalist): a poem by Seamus Heaney*, 2006, are also exceptional. Confined to the exhibition's website, however, these sounds can only be experienced in the gallery by sitting at a computer, donning headphones, and clicking a mouse. There may be valid motives for this choice, but it seems a missed opportunity to explore textuality through sonic interference.

Sol LeWitt's *The Location of Geometric Figures: A Blue Square, Red Circle, Yellow Triangle, and Black Parallelogram*, 1976, inscribes verbose descriptions of the dispositions of several elemental forms inside simple line drawings of those forms in primary colors. The descriptions are conceptually formal but their graphical realization appears casual—handwritten, near-horizontal lines of words descend from a convenient edge, vertex, or arc at the top of each shape and subtly shade portions of the interior spaces. Despite the precise care with which its forms are rendered, it seems more conceptual than visual, like an elaborate setup for a phenomenological joke about description versus analogical representation versus “the thing itself.” The latter category is notoriously slippery, and LeWitt foregrounds that fact in the series of wall drawings from which this piece is taken. His drawing is not a final product, but a model—a schematic, a set of instructions or a performance score to be realized on a wall by a draftsman. In this way, he recontextualizes the heuristic methods of his contemporaries in experimental music.

Molly Springfield's *Chapter IX*, 2008, apparently a

hand-drawn replica of a poor-quality photocopy of a book, stands as an inverse of Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum—an original forged from the copy it supplants. The depicted book, a nineteenth-century handbook on drawing, is open to the head of a chapter entitled “On Drawing from Flat Copies,” which turns out to be an argument against the educational use of the technique Springfield employed to produce her drawing. The representational layers are legion. A rapid oscillation is irresistible, slipping into the described instructional scene as into a dream, and being jolted back out to a close surface study by a slight vagary in the hand-drawn type, or the sudden realization that the apparent toner smudge in the crease of the book is in fact rendered in carefully stacked freehand pencil strokes. Such oscillation is precisely the condition for which the most self-conscious work in this exhibition primes the viewer, who experiences the visuality of writing and the interweaving of apparently autonomous visual objects. These perspectives permanently enrich each other.

—John Priestley

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Molly Springfield, *Chapter IX*, 2008, graphite on paper, 22 x 17 inches (© Molly Springfield; collection of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky, New York); Sol LeWitt, *The Location of Geometric Figures: A Blue Square, Red Circle, Yellow Triangle, and Black Parallelogram*, 1976, graphite and colored ink on paper, 17.5 x 17.5 inches (© 2011; collection of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky, New York; courtesy of The LeWitt Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)