Reflections on the word image

P.N. Furbank

Reflections on the Word ‘Image’

Liz Linden

For my family

Table of Contents

Part I

Reflections on the Word ‘Image’

If the purpose of an artist's PhD, a 'practice-led PhD', is to recognise that studio work is its own idiosyncratic form of knowledge-production, leading to its own unique insights, then my studio practice serves, in part, to research why it is so hard to talk (or even think) about the text so often visible in contemporary artworks—whether it is presented as the partner to an image, a fragment in a diverse collage, an index to the world outside the artwork, or a standalone element unto itself. Much of my research is an attempt to give text the aesthetic attention it demands, and to ultimately point to some of the political consequences of our own inattention to the operations of text in culture.

The difficulty language in art tends to present is in some ways predictable, given that, as artist Dave Beech explains, text art, meaning written language presented *in* or *as* the visible component of an artwork, is 'located at the intersection of contemporary philosophy, contemporary thinking on art and contemporary theories of language' (2009, p. 29). Of course Beech's list is by no means exhaustive; to it I would add, at a minimum, contemporary thinking about design, literature, feminism, and post-colonial politics.

This difficulty, while understandable, presents at least two practical problems in my practice, since I frequently use text in my work. First, the 'art' part of text-art generally seems almost impossible to assess for viewers, so overdetermining are our expectations of 'text'. In this, I take comfort in the fact that even the work of an artist as devoted to text as Ed Ruscha is still met with some bewilderment. In an interview with Ruscha, curator Bernard Blistène confesses:

> The language you use [in your artworks] is so 'spoken' that it stops me from speaking when I look at your paintings. For me, the impact of your work has so much to do with a kind of relocation from movies and books to the canvas, to the extent that I am blocked from having the kind of speech I might normally have with painting. (Ruscha 2002, p. 302)

And yet Ruscha is blunt in his assertion that his works with text are, simply, paintings, like still lifes of 'flowers in a vase' (2002, p. 264). So why is it so difficult to apply the tools of art criticism to it?

Second, in the necessary task of communicating my work to others, both in talking or writing about my impetus to work with language in the first place and my work with language itself, I often— ironically— find myself tongue-tied because the critical operations of language, where it's expressive through the multivalence of its disciplines that in any given context intermingle *differently* to

simultaneously enhance and undermine a text's respective meanings, are *where* the 'art' part of the text-art is. How do you pinpoint something that is always in motion?

This problem, the problem of how we speak about the meaning of text in text-art, in which that text is both a figure of speech and a figure, in some ways echoes the problems that plague our model of language itself. In language, a verbal image, meaning the mental picture evoked by a linguistic description, *also* operates multivalently. W.J.T. Mitchell explains:

> the whole question of whether verbal images are properly called 'images' gives us what Wittgenstein would call a 'mental cramp,' because the very distinction it assumes between literal and figurative expressions is, in literary discourse, entangled with the notion we want to explain, the verbal image.…The phrase, 'verbal imagery,' in other words, seems to be a metaphor for metaphor itself! (1986, p. 21)

In the case of text art, this mental cramp is further exacerbated because it extends across multiple axes of signification since text in art corresponds not only to a mental image, but is also a formal one. This extends the 'metaphor for metaphor' problem beyond the realm of ideas and into physical space, because 'the physical form of words and what they mean are contingent upon the other' (Rorimer 1989, p. 137). So not only does text art struggle to be comprehended because of the cramp-inducing quality of its mental image, identified by Mitchell in all verbal images, *but also* because it has a visible, written presence whose formal qualities affect its meaning and therefore its corresponding verbal image, *and also* because text art is an *image*, a *literal image*, which takes the complex self-reflexivity described by Wittgenstein and multiplies it.

While this verbal image ourobouros is equally characteristic of text as it is of text art, it is in the discourse of art, more than that of literature, or linguistics, or even typography, that we would expect to find answers to some of these slippery questions about the visible presence of text in art, both because text is intrinsic to so much of art practice today and, pointedly, because art discourse defines itself as *the* place where we go to find such answers about expression and meaning-making with aesthetic forms.

••

For the duration of my PhD, I have had pinned to my studio wall a quotation from 'The Unknown Masterpiece', a short story by Honoré de Balzac in which the main character, a painter named Frenhofer, unhinged by a viewer's tepid response to his newest painting, shouts, 'You are in front of a woman and you are looking for a picture!' (author's translation, 2000, p. 126).

I love this story, and this moment in it, for its fantastically heroic art-historical tropes, for the way in which it can be read anachronistically across a post-

modern axis of signification and framing (is it more accurate to say you see 'a woman' or 'a picture of a woman'?), and, ultimately, for its encapsulating the apparently timeless paranoia about the invisibility of their work that grips artists everywhere (in my case: what if, in my work with text, there is actually no *there* there?).

But I have always felt that the text visible in contemporary artworks serves as a direct, if contingent, conduit to a vast chain of meanings inherent in our shared language and to the weird and wonderful way those meanings fluctuate through time and place and person. Mitchell explains these fluctuations and vicissitudes by means of Derrida who in turn pins them on no less than God himself:

> Derrida reinstates the ancient figure of the world as a text… but with a new twist. Since the author of this text is no longer with us, or has lost his authority, there is no foundation for the sign, no way of stopping the endless chain of signification. This realization can lead us to a perception of the *mise en abime*, a nauseating void of signifiers. (1986, p. 29)

In essence what I have always loved (and feared) about text in art is that the viewer is allowed to be *both* Frenhofer and his dubious associate—seeing the woman and the word 'woman'— alike.

To me, it is clear that including language within the frame of an artwork is an obviously aesthetic and meaningful gesture, a gesture that Craig Owens might himself call '*en abyme*', spelled differently but still indebted to Derrida. Owens used his '*abyme*' to explain how a mirror depicted in a photograph 'tells us in a photograph what a photograph is' (1978, p. 75), pointing to its structural presence as 'an act of du*pli*cation, a literal folding back…upon itself' (p. 74). Owens's use of the *abyme* points to how it is not merely tautological, restating the same thing twice, but rather unlocking multiple representations and structures in a single concise form. I suspect for some others text art may feel glib, but even the simplest of rhymes or the most obnoxious of puns contain wild and complex chains of association that, like DNA, or a centerfold, or the '*pli*' of Owens, double back on themselves precisely so that they can encode so much so succinctly. And so text read across the multiple axes of semantic meaning, semiotic structure, formal presence, affective import, synesthetic pleasure, interactivity, poetry, and myriad others seems clearly to reach far into the pool of our collective unconscious and plumb those depths.

One reason for the difficulty in parsing text in contemporary art is that, despite its critically-canonised, steady evolution from Fluxus and Minimalism to Conceptualism (Kotz 2005, p. 3; Lippard 1997), this progression seemed to halt, at least in art historical recollections, in the postmodern moment where the photograph became paradigmatic. And yet this moment in the late 70s and

early 80s is precisely *the* moment when artists thought most directly about the functions of language in order to make distinctions about some of the shift ing, mutable vastness of representation in art. At that time, almost invariably art-historically geotagged to 1977's *Pictures* exhibition in New York, artists asked explicitly 'how to find forms that can address the vastness, [which] has a history that is and is not an art history, that is and is not American' (Nesbit 2003). While artworks exploring representation through linguistic frames were abundant in the 70s and 80s, and were often rife with text, art criticism describing those works rarely looked closely at the language presented within them, paradoxically asking questions of the art by reading its imagery like language, and yet, ignoring the answers so often provided by an artwork's text.

So, as I started to research and write about these questions, I began thinking about appropriated language specifically. Appropriated text was my focus not only because it characterises so much of the language I use in my own work, but also because appropriation is the signature gesture of postmodern art; appropriation presents something with which viewers are acquainted, but paradoxically that element's very familiarity seemed to prejudice viewers against it *as art*. The potential for appropriated language to function critically as a mirror held up to consumer culture is clear to me, in part, because artworks using language 'remove evidence of the artist's participation in the formation of the artwork, so that the form of the work and its content might mutually express one another without subjective comment by the artist' (Rorimer 1989, p. 139). Using *appropriated* language further extends that distance, putting the messaging of contemporary culture in dialogue with itself, becoming what Hal Foster calls 'both a target and weapon' (1985, p. 100).

It is my hope, then, that the written thesis effectively maps the terrain circumscribing and contextualising my work, detailing what 'appropriation' was said to describe from its postmodern inception in *Pictures* on through the ways it has typically been applied today. The thesis tries to reconceive of these coordinates not as delimiting marks for appropriation's map of practice but instead simply as trig points scattered across a much broader field that is still being surveyed. By denoting the emergence of postmodern appropriation in the 70s as a starting point in this survey, and then incorporating a couple of farther-flung, contemporary examples of appropriative practice, it is my hope that a more accurate, if provisional, picture of appropriation might emerge, a picture in which text appears somewhere towards the center.

So while I have not written *about* my artwork in that thesis, it is my hope that I have written *around* it, drafting a portrait of my work in that negative space. The artwork that I have realised under the umbrella of this PhD sits somewhere between the appropriations of Levine, Goldstein, and others, and the representations and reclamations of Collier and Tiravanija, in order to consider and contest the operations of language in commercial culture today.

My practice takes many forms and the work I am presenting here varies from interactive performance to an artist's book masquerading as a monograph to neon signs, photography, video, and more.

This work collected here, as disparate as it is, was all presented during the course of my PhD in solo exhibition contexts, and indeed one criterion for appearing in this book is that these works were ultimately exhibited to the public. Like many, probably most, artists, I find exhibitions to be tremendously helpful intellectually in terms of clarifying my own interests, which are recontextualised by the world when I drag my art out into it. Also, practically, an exhibition helps clear the decks, both literally and metaphorically.

But in this case, exhibiting these mostly text-based works served another key function towards completion. As in Freud's explanation of wit, where 'nobody is satisfied with making wit for himself. Wit-making is inseparably connected with the desire to impart it' (2014, p. 220), there seems to be an essential final step in my own studio practice that takes the monologue of the studio and places it into the dialogue of public context. This need for the works to communicate to someone to be completed, some literally, others less so, is of course not only the structure of a witticism, but also of language itself.

Diagram of Saussure's 'speaking circuit' (1959, p. 31)

This book is thus structured around four exhibitions or public performances: *Target Practice*, which took place at the TAEM Gallery at the University of Wollongong in March 2015; *The New York Times Feminist Reading Group*, which was made in collaboration with Jen Kennedy and is represented here by three performances from 2016 in New York and New South Wales; *TELETHON*, which was also made in collaboration with Kennedy and performed at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in March of 2017; and *Damaged Goods*, which opened at Cleopatra's in New York City in February of 2017.

Target Practice was an exhibition of icons, asking what these icons mean, as they are appropriated, contextualised, recontextualised, conflated, and confused in a multiplicity of cultural environments, underscoring the fluid nature of

significance itself. The works in the exhibition were conceived as a progression, which was set in motion via an appropriation that iterated from one work to the next, for example beginning with a photographic work from 2014 titled *Real Aussie Sheds*, which depicted a commercial sign installed along the Princes Highway in New South Wales. The sign bears a representation of Uluru with a shed door installed in its side as if it were a giant storage unit, while the Real Aussie Sheds business slogan, 'Solid as the Rock', is written alongside, oxymoronically eliding the hollowness and solidness intrinsic to the nature of a storage shed, of a sacred rock.

From there the exhibition moved to two neon signs, one, *The Rock* (2015), presenting a acrylic-mounted photograph of an actor also with a sobriquet 'The Rock', posing for a promotional image in front of the Sydney Opera House, another synecdoche for Australia itself. The neon on that work traces the line of the Opera House's roof, which then gets duplicated and repurposed to form the shape of the fins of an ouroboros of circling sharks in *target* (2015). The exhibition concludes with a circular, looped video (*Mmmn, no. 2*, 2015) of footage of celebrity chefs appropriated from TV cooking shows. In the video, each chef murmurs 'mmmn' after tasting his or her own food, and these utterances are edited together sequentially into a single, continuous groan of onanic delight. Here the format of the ouroboros is ascribed to another mascot of consumption: the celebrity chef, who functions as a symbol of the aspirations and appetites of a globalised marketplace, where food, not merely as sustenance but also spectacle, has become a signifier of everything from wealth, sophistication, internationalisation, cosmopolitanism, nationality, provincialism, local identity, and so forth.

While in some sense the *Target Practice* exhibition was inspired by the ways language shifts across contexts, my ongoing collaboration with Canadian writer and artist Jen Kennedy focuses explicitly on the variety of meanings and associations a single word can hold. Kennedy and I have worked together since 2008 on creating interactive projects that serve as platforms for public discourse about contemporary meanings of the word 'feminism'. From that collaboration, I have included two recent works here: our ongoing public performance titled *The New York Times Feminist Reading Group* (represented here with a performance at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, held in early November 2016, three days before the American presidential election), as well as its Australian counterpart, *The Sydney Morning Herald Feminist Reading Group*, held at both the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and the University of Wollongong in early 2016.

The New York Times Feminist Reading Group is exactly what it sounds like: a reading group devoted to discussing that day's issue of *The New York Times* from a feminist perspective. The work combines a number of feminist meeting group models, from the consciousness-raising models of 1960s and

70s activism to the specialty seminar formats of the academic reading group to the socially-oriented book-clubs convened in hosts' domestic spaces, while not fitting any of the above models exactly. Using the ephemeral, temporal nature of the newspaper to naturally enforce a non-heirarchical interaction between participants, ourselves included, who by definition have no more than that day to prepare or master the day's newspaper, the changing subject matter of each performance of the *Reading Group* necessarily allows for participants from a broad range of backgrounds and political positions to contribute. *The New York Times Feminist Reading Group* allows us to examine the media landscape through the lens of feminism and also look at feminism through the lens of the media, and in this way each performance tells us something about the wide variety of what feels urgent and relevant to each participant that day.

In 2017 Kennedy and I undertook a residency at the Hammer Museum to realise a new performance titled *TELETHON*. *TELETHON* is also a public performance work, although of a different order. Inspired by experimental performances of the 60s, *TELETHON* is an hour-long sonic transmission performance staged in front of a live audience. At heart quite simple, actors seated in a telethon set call numbers from a page ripped from the local Los Angeles white pages phone book and ask the person on the other end of the line, 'What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word "feminism"?' The piece iterates from seemingly endless dial tones and ringing, to momentary windows into random lives transmitted by the sounds of outgoing voicemail, and then the occasional surprised response to the one-question political poll. The live performance was cacophonous, an illustration of the chaos, disparity, and heterogeneity of contemporary understandings of feminism. *TELETHON* was also broadcast live online and archived, and that livestream can be watched at: http://lizlinden.com/TELETHON.html.

The New York Times Feminist Reading Group and *TELETHON* both appropriate familiar formats and materials (the reading group and the newspaper in the former, the telethon broadcast and the phonebook in the latter) to foster potentially challenging political discourse by encouraging it in unintimidating formats. Just as appropriation uses the familiarity of elements of pop culture as a Trojan horse to allow culture to undermine itself, as they are recontextualised into art and 'their rather brutal familiarity gives way to strangeness' (Crimp 1980, p. 100), these performances take the difficulty of publically discussing contemporary political categories and positions and house it in an interface with which we are already acquainted. That *The New York Times Feminist Reading Group* and *TELETHON* are ultimately relational artworks, where the relationships are set in motion by language itself is of a piece with my larger practice, which inquires into the overlooked role of language in defining and enforcing neoliberal ends and biases.

Damaged Goods was a solo exhibition of my work at Cleopatra's in Brooklyn, New York. At a glance, the exhibition seemed to be named after the largest works in the show, a series of prints titled *Damaged Goods (covers)*, however those works were themselves inspired by another exhibition about appropriation and consumer culture, curator Brian Wallis's *Damaged Goods* from 1986 at the New Museum in New York.

Damaged Goods (covers) came about because in 2014, in searching for a copy of Wallis's exhibition catalog for my research, I discovered a preponderance of romance, Christian self-help, and true crime novels sharing the same title as his seminal book and exhibition. Invariably these books' pulpy cover designs featured a woman as the eponymous damaged good. Since then I have collected these books, exhibiting them side-by-side on an increasingly long shelf. In 2016 I began making large-scale prints of these covers, each presenting a book from this collection. Six works from this print series appeared in my 2017 *Damaged Goods* exhibition.

In the *Damaged Goods (covers)* prints, the books' covers, scaled up proportionally so that their titular characters appear in larger-than-life sizes, are printed on 72-by-44-inch paper. My exhibition cloaked itself in Wallis's title in order to reflect on how his insights from 1986 remain equally (or more) true today, a consistency that belies the inescapability of capitalism as it foments consumer desire (among other things). In 1986 Wallis noted that:

> the world is already becoming more homogenous through the repetition and proliferation of the signs of culture, therefore it is inevitable that people in various cultures could be induced to want the same brands and products…the penetration of the image is so deep and so effective that it has evacuated cultural distinctions among local consumers. (p. 25)

His prescience in recognising at its postmodern inception that appropriation was uniquely suited to addressing globalisation remains key to unlocking the potential of many types of appropriation even today.

In addition to the *Damaged Goods (covers)* print series, my *Damaged Goods* exhibition included *Target Practice by Jessica Michael* (2016), an artist's book, and *lookalikes* (2017), a neon sign hung in Cleopatra's storefront window. *lookalikes* was intended to appear faulty—while the glass tubing of the neon read 'lookalikes' in its entirely, the sign was designed to illuminate only the 'look' and then 'like' sections separately and sequentially, so that the sign in the window alternately exhorted passersby to 'look' and 'like' what they see in the storefront window.

lookalikes operates self-reflexively to comment on itself and the other works in the exhibition, the neon sign in the window, alternately referring to the fact that appropriations, including all the appropriations in the exhibition, hinge on

'looking like' something, and also how the commands 'look' and 'like' operate in a storefront, as an immodest commercial come-on. That the sign itself appears damaged also doubles back to the title of the exhibition and the works in the show.

While the *Damaged Goods (covers)* display women who are broken by life and *lookalikes* flickers forlornly in the window, the *Target Practice by Jessica Michael* monograph is itself marred, spoilt by plagiarism. *Target Practice by Jessica Michael* is an artist's book of appropriated and repurposed texts masquerading as a monograph on my work by the fictionalised author 'Jessica Michael'. The book is both an accurate description of my work and a fiction composited from unrelated texts by other writers. I have appropriated these texts, inserted my name in the place of their subjects, and ordered the excerpts in such a way that the book reads as a seamless critical essay about my own practice. *Target Practice by Jessica Michael* is therefore a book both of and about my work with appropriated text.

This book, because it is illustrated with images of my works and serves as an accurate, if forged, description of my practice, also folds into it further artworks realised over the course of the PhD that extend these inquiries beyond the works represented in this table of contents and out into the broader field of my practice. I have reproduced *Target Practice by Jessica Michael*, in its entirety within this book, *Reflections on the Word 'Image'*, in order both to represent the artist's book here, and to present the works within that, which in turn reflect back on other artworks and operations already described above—*en abyme*.

••

If I started this essay in the studio with one linguistic confusion pinned to my wall, I have another visual reminder in my studio of productive misunderstandings. For the longest time, seven years in fact, I have had P.N. Furbank's 1970 book, *Reflections on the Word 'Image'*, sitting by my desk. I can date this book's arrival in the studio so precisely because I bought it on my honeymoon, when my new husband and I stopped on our cross-America drive at Booked Up, an obscure if enormous used bookstore run by novelist Larry McMurtry in Archer City, Texas. Archer City is a ghost-town and McMurtry was therefore able to buy up multiple adjacent buildings and barns, filling them with used books. There were, as a result, seemingly-endless sections devoted to books about art, books of pulp fiction, critical theory, self-help, economics, you-name-it. It was impossible to get through it all in an afternoon, which was all we had until we had to drive the remaining three and a half hours before our next motel closed for the night. By inclination, I paced the poetry and literary theory aisles, walking out of Booked Up with a trousseau of books that included Furbank's *'Image'*.

It had what I interpreted as a wonderfully coy cover, forest green with lettering in an oversized Courier type, the words printed in olive except for 'image', lambent in white. (This dust jacket has since been torn apart by my toddler and so now the book sits naked on my desk, the title foil-stamped into the greying book cloth cover.) On first sight of the title, I knew this book was for me, answering precisely the questions about the text visible in art that have dogged me throughout my career, and into this PhD.

It is not an exaggeration to say that this book has inspired me every day since I bought it. I took solace in the sheer fact of its existence, feeling a surge of gratitude and fellowship every time I glanced at it on my table thinking, 'Yes! He's right! That's exactly it!' and then, renewed, turned back to my efforts to track this precise white whale that Furbank seemed to so succinctly both catch and release with his title. The book promised to resolve that headache of Frenhofer, asking us to not only *read* what is in front of us but to *see* it as well. In short, I assumed Furbank was a kindred soul disclosing, in the most economical way possible, the fact that the word 'image' is, among other things, an image itself. I further imagined that Furbank's eponymous 'reflections' would draw out this tangle of meanings and satisfactions which has often troubled and motivated my own work, that he would allow each sense of 'image' to operate *simultaneously*, multivalently, and intuitively without closing down one function in order to express another.

That this was a complete misperception of Furbank's title[1], an almost heteronymic and utterly solipsistic confusion on my part about how 'the word "image"' signified for the author, misread through the lens of my own obsession with this question of why words go unremarked in artworks, is a personal joke to me now. I won't tell you about the inevitable moment, recently, when I discovered my error. Further, I am ashamed to admit that in fact I have been clearly so enamored of my own imaginings of this book and so alarmingly desperate for it to be precisely what I wanted that I delusionally allowed my imagined version of the book to trump the real one; in the wash of other texts and concerns and occurrences over these last eventful years, I actually *forgot* that sometime in that first year after buying the Furbank, perhaps when I was still pregnant with my first daughter, I picked up the book and started reading it, swiftly recoiling in horror when, from page one, it became abundantly clear Furbank was not thinking about 'image' in the way I expected. That I then put it back on my shelf and (somehow!) suppressed that knowledge, sealing myself off from those facts in the fugue state of research so effectively that I once again, sometime into my PhD, picked up the book in the same glow of solidarity and repeated

1 Furbank's book is actually a debate about semantics in literary theory and an objection to the way literary critics use 'metaphor' and 'image' almost interchangeably. W.J. T. Mitchell wryly describes Furbank's treatment of the topic as 'exhaustive' and explains that 'Furbank debunks all notions of mental and verbal imagery as illegitimate metaphors, and argues that we should confine ourselves to the "natural sense of the word 'image', as meaning a likeness, a picture, or a simulacrum"' (1986, p. 13).

the whole sad story is both alarming and hilarious to me.

This book is a modern marvel for me now, an epistemological fetish, pointing at the almost metaphysical power of text and its signification to not only engender headaches that had the power to stop Wittgenstein in his tracks but also strong enough to induce amnesia itself. The book is, in short, a migraine.

Migraines are characterised by another symptom equally afflicting both me in my saga with Furbank and everyone facing text art as well: partial-blindness. Such ocular effects in a migraine are medically known as an 'aura', a Benjaminian turn of phrase that immediately returns us to the rabbit hole of mechanical reproduction and the origins of appropriation itself, and therefore feels like a further volley from my bookshelf, Furbank taunting me from the grave. *Mise en abyme*, indeed.

I have had a migraine once, last year, which was primarily alarming because of the aura that announced it, occluding the centre of my field of vision entirely, as if a diagram of my eye could map my sight, the blackness of the pupil at the centre now a negative space. It happened while I was driving to school, actually, so I pulled off the road in Nowra and tried to buy a coffee, a task made absolutely impossible by the fact I couldn't see the person standing directly in front of me at the counter.

It is this quality, the quality of something standing in front of you and having a meaning that you cannot entirely fix, even though you are aware that it is there, is one thing that has motivated this PhD; I wanted to put my finger on it. But in the end, again, I have worked *around* the problem. My written work has focused on art historical oversights of the centrality of text to appropriation, while my studio work has plunged into the sea of neoliberal language inexorably rising around us and re-presented such text in order to understand how such texts operate, and operate on us. In short the written work of my thesis focuses on the art historical outcomes of a critical blind spot for appropriated text, even as the art struggles against it.

Taken as a whole, this body of work tries to make the case for expanding the frame around what kinds of representations appropriation calls into question in order to recognise that appropriated text can tell us something timely, unique, and essential about the messages of globalisation. Both the written thesis and my studio work try to make the case for examining appropriated texts' processes and pathways, even where, *especially* where, they intersect and we lose our bearings in the act of surveying them. It is tempting to liken this mapping process to the feedback loop I found myself in with Furbank, or the ourobouros Mitchell points out with Wittgenstein, or the concentric rings of Foster's target, or the auratic discs of the migrainic eye, because it seems to repeat itself without progress. But a more optimistic and, I think, accurate

model for mapping the interdependent and inter-active multiple valences of meaning in appropriated text, which don't so much repeat themselves endlessly as deviate subtly even as you follow them along, may be the Moebius strip, still doubling back on itself, but with a twist.

References

Balzac, Hd 2000, *Selected short stories = Contes choisis*, Dover Publications, Mineola.

Beech, D 2009, 'Turning the Whole Thing Around: Text Art Today', in A Selby (ed.), *Art and Text*, Black Dog, London.

Crimp, D 1980, 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism', *October*, vol. 15, pp. 91-101.

Foster, H 1985, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Bay Press, Port Townsend.

Freud, S 2014, *Wit And Its Relation To The Unconscious*, Taylor & Francis.

Furbank, PN 1970, *Reflections on the Word 'Image'*, Secker & Warburg, London.

Rorimer, A 1989 'Photography—Language—Context: Prelude to the 1980s', in A Goldstein, C Gudis & MJ Jacob (eds), *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

Kotz, L 2005, 'Language between Performance and Photography', *October*, vol. 111, pp. 3-21.

Lippard, LR 1997, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Mitchell, WJT 1986, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Nesbit, M 2003, 'Bright light, big city', *Artforum*, vol. 41, pp. 185-189,245,248.

Owens, C 1978, 'Photography "en abyme"', *October*, vol. 5, pp. 73-88.

Ruscha, E 2002, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

Saussure, Fd, 1959, 'The Linguistic Sign', in RE Innis (ed.), 1985, *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Wallis, B 1986, *Damaged Goods*, New Museum, New York.

Part II

Target Practice
2015

Target Practice was a solo exhibition of my work in the TAEM Gallery at the University of Wollongong from March 10 to April 1, 2015. The exhibition consisted of four works.

Real Aussie Sheds
2014
Archival pigment print (ed. 1 of 5)
51" x 34"

The Rock
2015
Neon, controller, perspex, ecosolvent printed vinyl
29.5" x 19.7" x 3.9"

target
2015
Neon, controller, sequencers, perspex
39" x 39" x 3.9"

Mmmn, no. 2
2015
Video (ed. 1 of 3)
1 minute loop

Real Aussie Sheds, 2014


TARRANTS
SERVICE CENTRE
Southern Branch Coming Soon!
Welding Equipment LPG Water Tanks
Trade Tools Safety Products
BOC
REAL AUSSIE SHEDS

The Rock, 2015

target, 2015

Mmmn, no. 2, 2015

The New York Times Feminist Reading Group
ongoing since 2009

The New York Times Feminist Reading Group is an ongoing collaboration with Jen Kennedy, which we have performed in over 30 venues internationally since 2009. Documentation of three performances from 2016 follow, one in New York City using *The New York Times*, and two from versions of the work performed in Australia earlier that year using *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

The New York Times Feminist Reading Group
2009-present
Participants, newspapers, seating
Dimensions variable
Performance documentation from the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 5, 2016
Photo credit: Filip Wolak
Pages 56-57

The Sydney Morning Herald Feminist Reading Group
2016
Participants, newspapers, seating
Dimensions variable
Performance documentation from the University of Wollongong, Wollongong, March 15, 2016
Photo credit: Paul Jones
Pages 58-59

The Sydney Morning Herald Feminist Reading Group
2016
Participants, newspapers, seating
Dimensions variable
Performance documentation from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, March 8, 2016
Photo credit: MCA
Pages 60-62


The New York Times


SportsDay

TELETHON
2017

TELETHON was realized in collaboration with Jen Kennedy at the Hammer Museum on March 4, 2017. *TELETHON* was performed live in front of a museum audience, simultaneously broadcast and archived online, and also transmitted to random members of the local population through their telephone lines. Video of the performance is available at www.lizlinden.com/TELETHON.html.

TELETHON
2017
15 callers, 15 telephone lines, telethon set, audio and video equipment, 2 videographers, Los Angeles phone book
55-minute live transmission performance
Performance documentation from the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, March 4, 2017
Photo credit: Todd Cheney


13


TELETHON

Damaged Goods
2017

Damaged Goods, was a solo exhibition of my work at Cleopatra's in New York City from February 26 to March 27, 2017. The exhibition included the *Damaged Goods (covers)* series plus an artist's book and a neon sign installation.

Damaged Goods (Sharfeddin)
2016
Archival inkjet print
44" x 72"

Damaged Goods (Urban)
2016
Archival inkjet print
44" x 72"

Damaged Goods (Henderson)
2016
Archival inkjet print
44" x 72"

Damaged Goods (Tucker)
2016
Archival inkjet print
44" x 72"

Damaged Goods (Gallagher)
2016
Archival inkjet print
44" x 72"

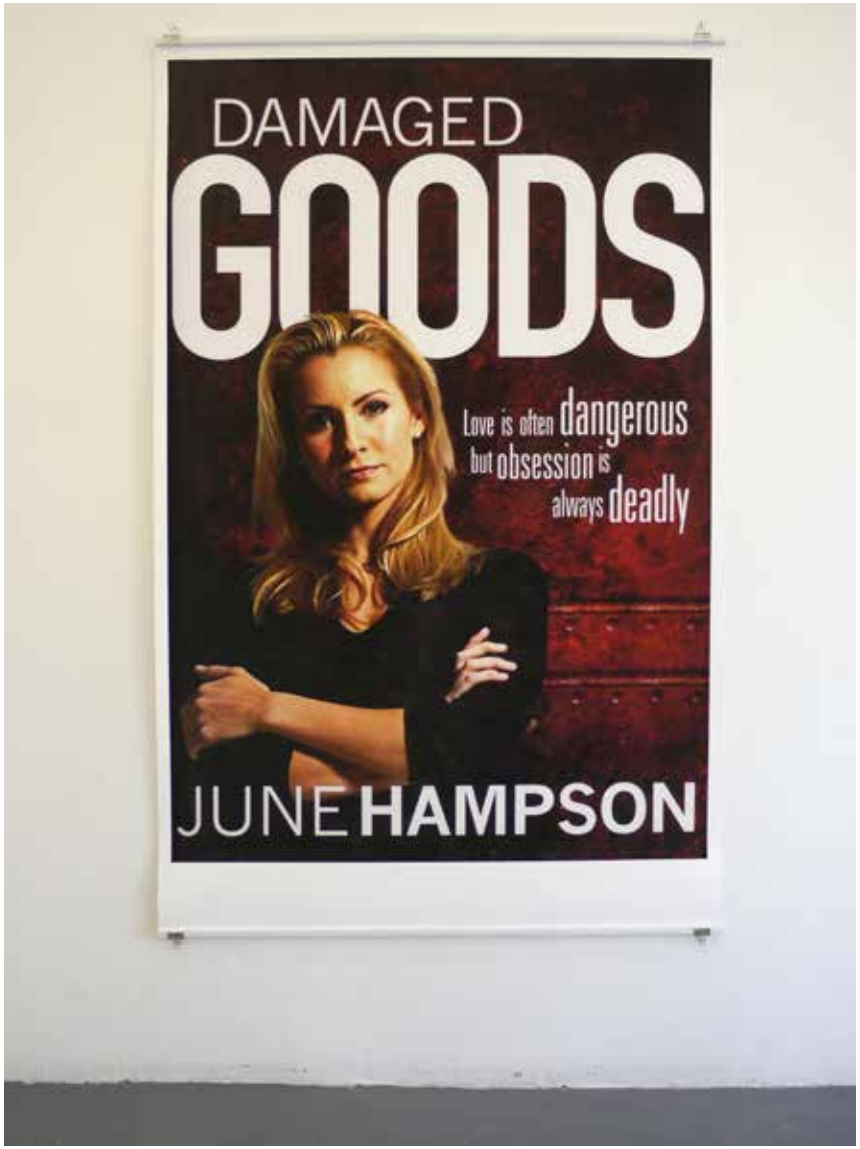
Damaged Goods (Hampson)
2016
Archival inkjet print
44" x 72"

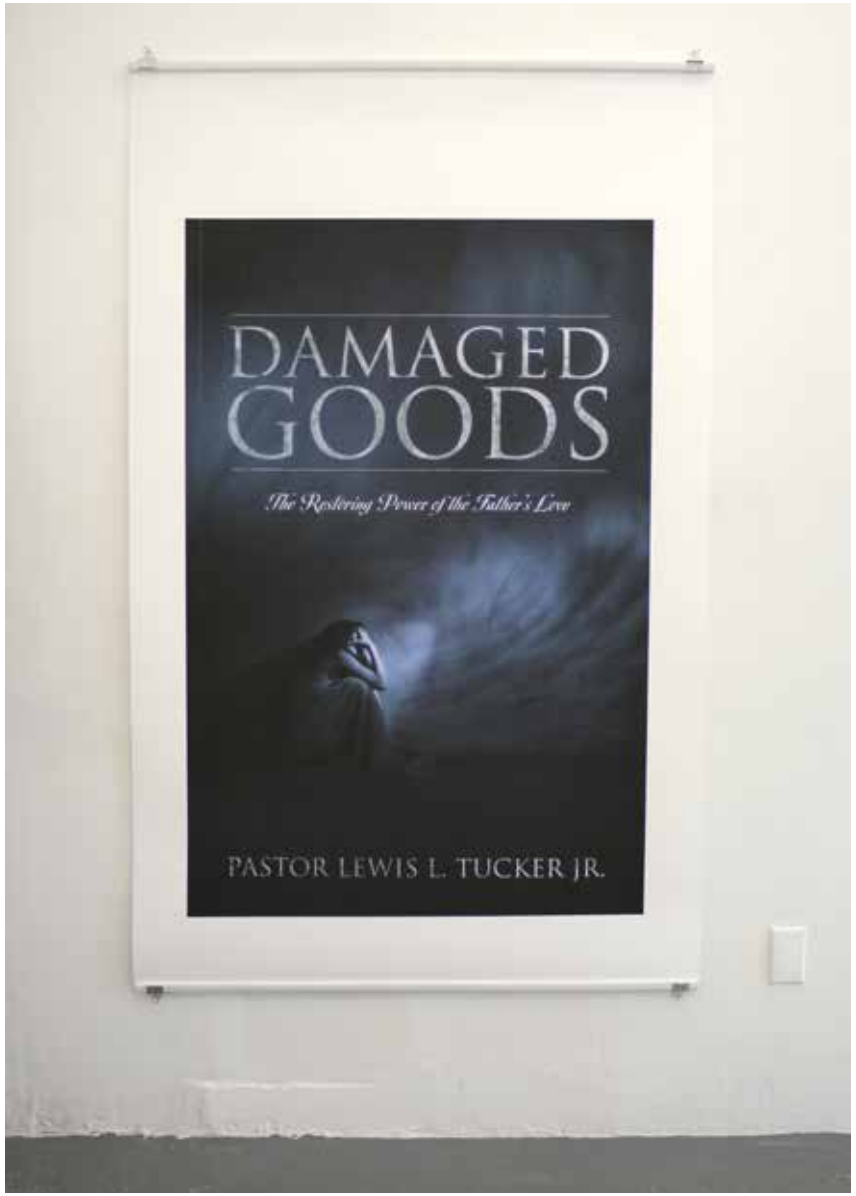
lookalikes
2017
Neon sign and transformers
33" x 7" x 4"

Target Practice by Jessica Michael
2016
Digitally printed book
4.5" x 7.5" x 1/4"

Damaged Goods (covers), 2016

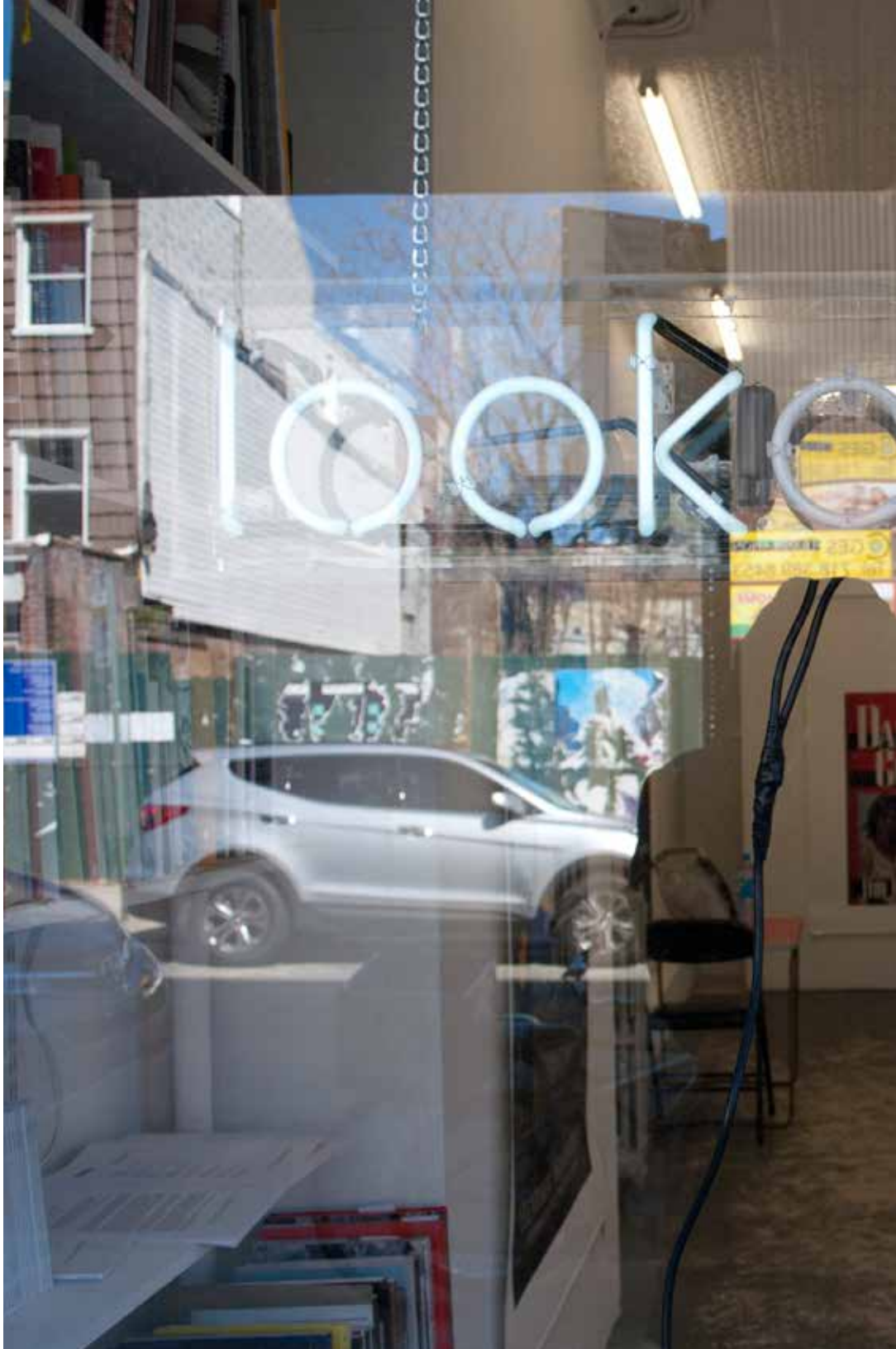

DAMAGED
GOODS
LAUREN GALLAGHER
"[A] great emotional read." —Siren Book Reviews


DAMAGED
GOODS
Love is often dangerous
but obsession is
always deadly
JUNE HAMPSON


DAMAGED
GOODS
The Restoring Power of the Father's Love
PASTOR LEWIS L. TUCKER JR.


Diamond Stone Productions Presents
NIKKI URBAN
DAMAGED
GOODS


DAMAGED GOODS
Jim Thompson
DAMAGED GOODS
DAMAGED GOODS
LAUREN GALLAGHER



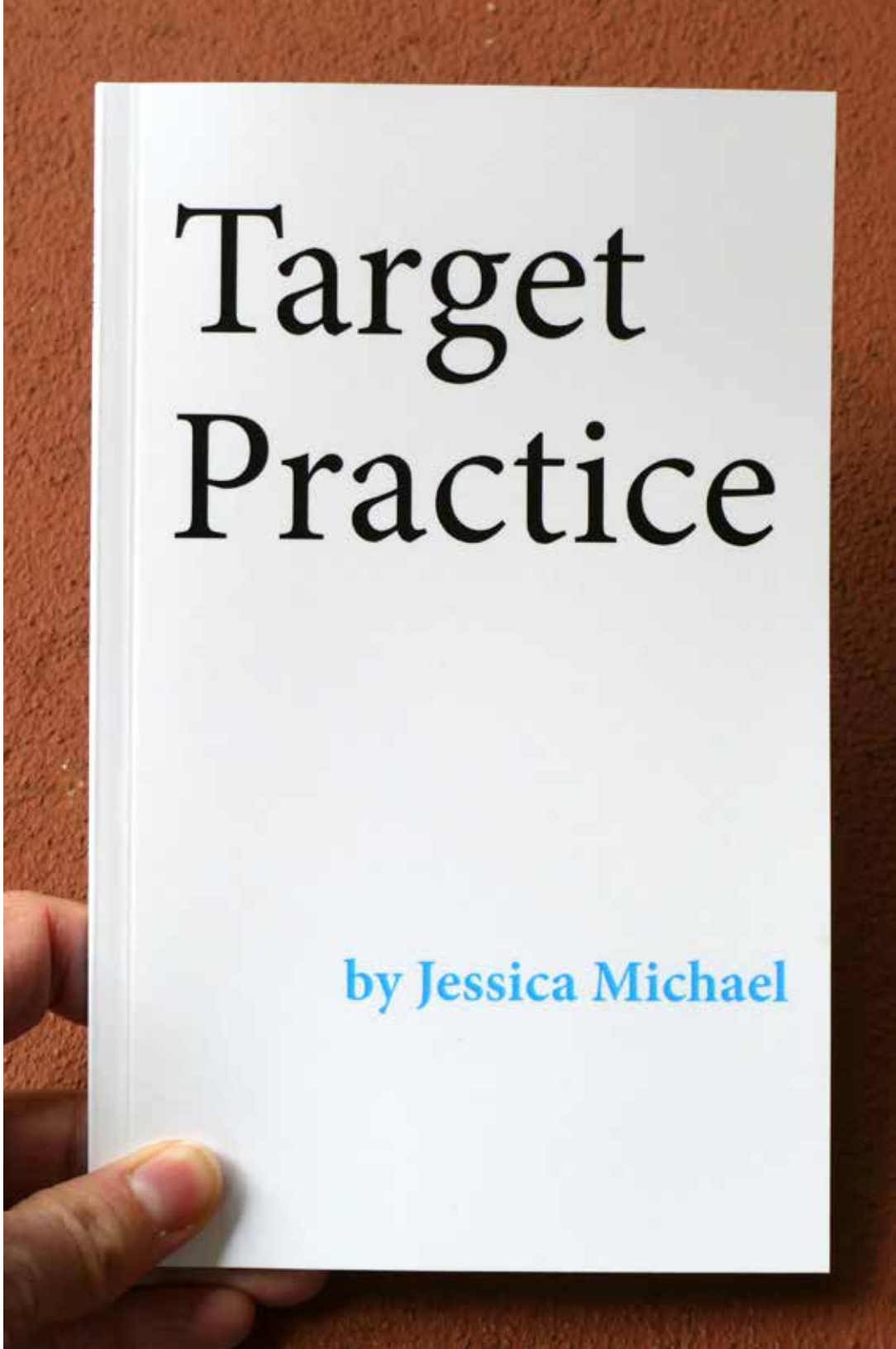
lookalikes, 2017


Cleopatra's


Cleopatra's


lookalikes


lookalikes



Target Practice by Jessica Michael, 2016

Target Practice

by Jessica Michael

I'm not offended by all the dumb blonde jokes
because I know I'm not dumb...
and I also know that I'm not blonde.

—Dolly Parton

CONTENTS

His and Hers

Fundamentally, what all artists are doing is trying to find something, and create something, that hasn't been before. Artists engaged in this work do not necessarily know what it is they are looking for. All they can do is search through the materials, work with the process, and take the time to sort, to add in, and to take away, in the attempt to create that "something new," or find ways of "seeing anew." Liz Linden's work, I believe, resides in the latter camp and her insistence on working in that zone, exclusively, points to her political commitment to the pragmatic over the utopian.

Linden's practice, which deals with language both as a material and as a methodology asks, "Is the linguistic message constant? What is the significance of the textual matter typically presented in, under, or around an image?" Her work frequently links text and image, to study those links from a structural point of view, asking, "What is the signifying structure of 'illustration'? Does the image duplicate certain of the information given in the text by a phenomenon of redundancy or does the text add fresh information to the image?"

Thus, though she is often working at the outset on non-linguistic substances (images from magazines, analog television signals, architectural forms, etc.), semiology is required, sooner or later, to find language (in the ordinary sense of the term) in its path, not only as a model, but also as component, relay or signified. Even so, such language is not quite that of the linguist: it is a second-order language, with its unities no longer monemes or phonemes,

but larger fragments of discourse referring to objects or episodes whose meaning *underlies* language, but can never exist independently of it.

While Linden is concerned with the power at work in many different forms of social representations, she confesses a specific love of working with text. She explains that she feels "obliged to steal language," not least because appropriation, in the aftermath of postmodernism and *Pictures*, was "far too often conceived of as a tool exclusively for working on images, such that today it's the directives of language that are most often taken at face value, in art and elsewhere." As Barthes wrote:

> Language is legislation, speech is its code…. To utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate.…Language—the performance of a language system—is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist.

In her works with appropriated text, Linden seeks to undo this "fascism," to display the censorious circularity of our idiolects. Her

work suggests not only how language subjects us but how we may disarm it. Here again the tactic is subversive complicity rather than utopianism; it is within speech that speech must be fought, led astray—not by the message of which it is the instrument, but by the play of words of which it is the theater.

Moreover, Linden's work concerns itself with instances where texts are unstable—not only because language is unstable but also because they contain discrepancies. The primary purpose of this deconstruction is to probe a text for its conflicting assumptions, premises, and self-deceptions with the intention of revealing that the text (or image) does not necessarily mean what it claims to. These discrepancies are the precise subject of Linden's work. Linden places in contradiction certain ideological structures normally kept apart, setting them into open conflict and exposing the coercion that is usually hidden in language, which, once exposed, appears ridiculous.

Facing page: *his and hers, March 9, 2008*, 2008, men's cotton t-shirt, women's cotton sweatpants, original Kmart hangers and price tags, chrome display rack, 48"x12"x60"

COPY (simile), 2015, multi-site public artwork, screenprinted aluminum signs, hardware, existing signposts, 12”x18”

Copy

Linden’s purloined images and texts have invariably been emblematic, allegorical; she does not represent women, the businessman, or movie stars, but Woman, Business, Hollywood. She is not, however, primarily interested in these subjects *per se*, but in images of them. This is the primary motive behind her strategy of appropriation, for we can approach such subjects, Linden believes, only through their cultural representation.

Her work questions the stability of such representations, sometimes by juxtaposing

texts and images so that they function as a palimpsest. Her blatant disregard for aesthetic categories is nowhere more apparent than in the reciprocity, which allegory proposes, between the visual and the verbal: Linden's words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered.

The content for her work is often drawn from that aspect of our culture which is most thoroughly manipulative of the roles we play, mass advertising, whose photographic strategy is to disguise the directorial mode as a form of documentary. Linden steals the most frank and banal of this content, which registers as a kind of shock outside of its intended environment. But ultimately its rather brutal familiarity gives way to strangeness, as an unintended and unwanted dimension of fiction reinvades it. By isolating, enlarging, and juxtaposing aspects of commercial messages, Linden points to their invasion by these ghosts of fiction.

Facing page: *COPY*, 2009, multi-site public artwork, screenprinted aluminum signs, hardware, existing signposts, 12"x18"

The New York Times Feminist Reading Group, 2009-present, made in collaboration with Jen Kennedy, newspapers, seating, public participants, performance documentation by Ryan Tempro

The New York Times Feminist Reading Group

Once in her studio I asked Linden if she contemplated any new themes in her work. She grabbed a few bits of wood and, with a red magic marker, wrote on them some phrases from recent news stories that had been on her mind—and her nerves. One was "vertically integrated digital media"—"Doesn't mean anything," she said—from reports on the shift in direction at *The New Republic*, led by a C.E.O. who had promised, employing a Silicon Valley cliché, to "break shit." Linden is irritated, in general, by "startup companies calling

themselves the new counterculture" when it's really "just business."

She also wrote "vertical patrolling," the practice followed by New York City police officers in the stairwells of high-rise housing projects, which had figured in accounts of the fatal shooting of an unarmed African-American man in Brooklyn. That phrase, too, struck her as anodyne words obscuring their consequences and, perhaps, as material—a verbal object—fit for her use. She plunked down the signs, as sample titles, at the bases of random sculptures in the studio. How, if at all, these matters will register in her work, she wouldn't say. They already had, to my mind, as she retrieved the signs and tossed them on a table.

Linden's work seeks to disorient the law, to call language in to crisis. This is what ideology cannot afford, for it tends to operate in language that denies its status as such: stereotypical language. Careful reading functions as activism in her practice, both

privately and in the collaborative contexts of some of her work. Through the provocation of art and the reaction of participants, different political positions are articulated publicly through contradiction. By this direct presentation of political response outside of the popular media, her interactive work assures both its radicality and its visibility. For it operates within everyday representations and spaces but not at the positions which power establishes through them, contending that it is at such a shifting crossroads that effective resistance can be (pro)posed.

Yet, by the same token, this art cannot afford to take the demonstrations of political and institutional critique for granted, because it depends, to some extent, on critical support and positive media coverage to reinforce its status in the art world. For without specific attention to its own institution this social practice, even now well-received in the gallery/museum nexus, will be recuperated as yet another avant-gardist exercise, a mere

manipulation rather than active transformation of social signs.

Facing page: *Bedford Ave, Brooklyn (The New York Times Feminist Reading Group)*, 2014, made in collaboration with Jen Kennedy, selected digital photographs from series of 100

heteronyms (Spiritual America), 2016, diptych, archival pigment prints, 44" x 54.6" each

Heteronyms

The totalizing ambitions of any theory (take Marxism, for example, which claims to account for every form of social experience) is characteristic of all theoretical discourse, and is one reason women frequently condemn it as phallocratic. It is not always theory *per se* that women repudiate, nor simply, as Lyotard has suggested, the priority men have granted it, its rigid opposition to practical experience. Rather, what they challenge is the distance it maintains between itself and its objects—a distance

which objectifies and masters.

Because of the tremendous effort of re-conceptualization necessary to prevent a phallologic relapse in their own discourse, feminist artists have historically forged new (or renewed) alliances with theory, and Linden aligns her own sensibility with theirs. Many of these artists themselves made major theoretical contributions: Linden cites filmmaker Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," as an example of one such artist who opened her own eyes to the critical potential of writing from her position as an artist.

Indeed, feminist artists often regard critical or theoretical writing as an important arena of strategic intervention: Martha Rosler's critical texts on the documentary tradition in photography—among the best in the field—are a crucial part of her activity *as an artist*. Many modernist artists, of course, produced texts about their own production,

but writing was almost always considered supplementary to their primary work as painters, sculptors, photographers, etc., whereas the kind of simultaneous activity on multiple fronts that characterizes many feminist practices is an ongoing phenomenon that persists from the time of postmodernism.

"I find writing productive because it allows me to pursue issues that are intrinsic to my practice, and apply my techniques across disciplines. Take clarity, which is something I think about a lot in the studio—the political stakes of clarity in representations. In certain kinds of writing," Linden explained, "particularly in art criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning. Words like 'depth,' 'virtual,' 'values,' 'human,' 'dead,' 'sentimental,' 'natural,' 'vitality,' as used in art criticism, are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly ever expected to do so by the reader. When one critic writes, 'The outstanding feature of

X's work is its living quality,' while another writes, 'The immediately striking thing about X's work is its peculiar deadness,' the reader accepts this as a simple difference of opinion. If words like black and white were involved, instead of the jargon words dead and living, she would see at once that language was being used in an improper way."

She went on: "Many political words are similarly abused. In the case of a word like 'democracy,' not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning. Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to

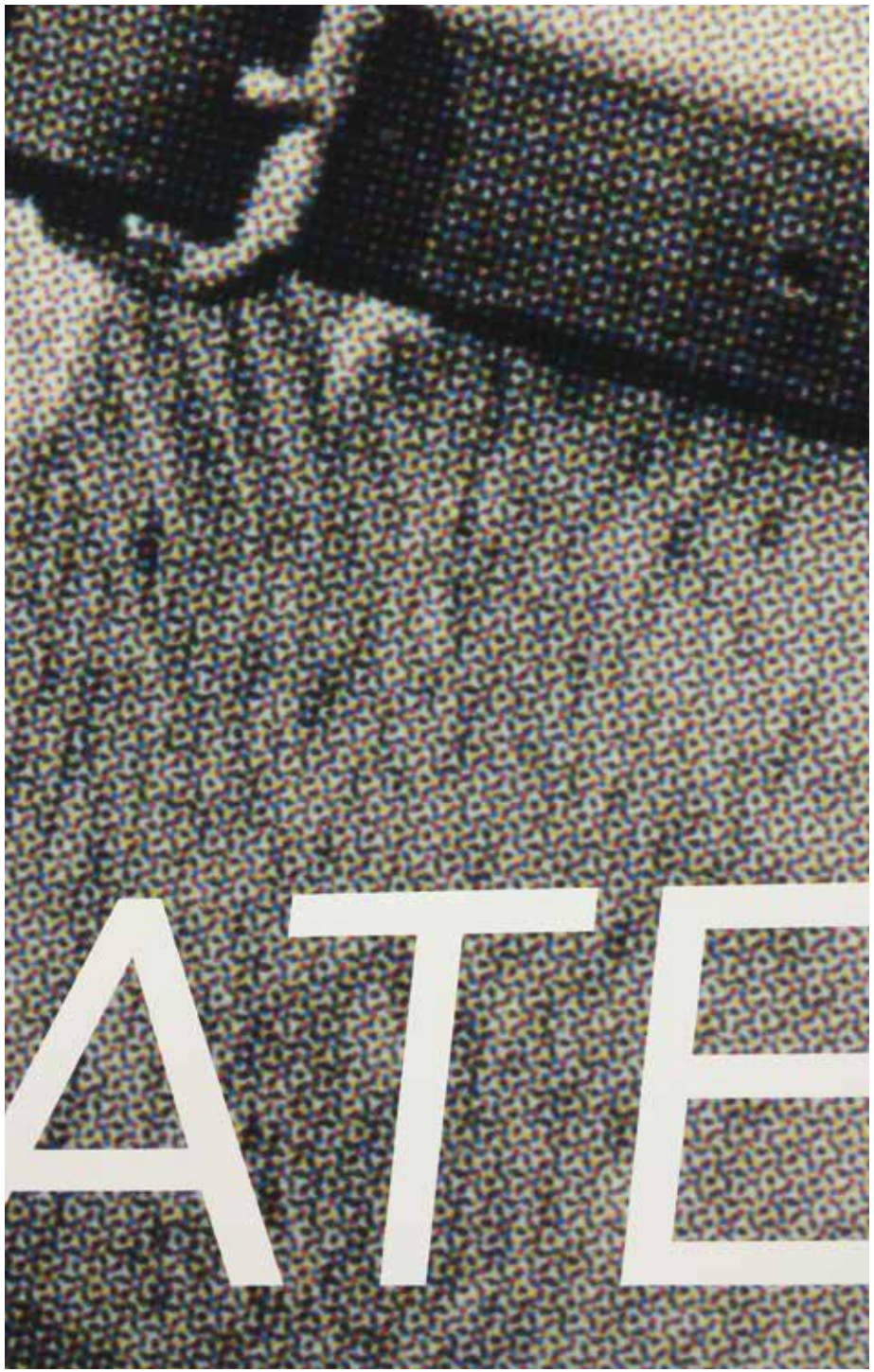
think he means something quite different. It is these kinds of shifts that my work tries to make visible."

"Right now," she says, "I'm interested in thinking about how an existing object, image, or text, which has been muted via being presented inside a gallery, can perhaps operate in a more open-ended way than the original item itself. I'm increasingly using fewer interventions; I'm trying to be brave."

When I pressed her on this bent toward minimalism, she explained "When I'm making work, of any kind, I try to keep in mind at least four questions: What am I trying to say? What gestures will express it? What image or element will make it clearer? Is this element fresh enough to have an effect? And I should probably ask myself two more: Could I put it more succinctly? Have I made anything that is avoidably ugly?" She shrugs. "I guess that's where the minimalism comes in."

Linden shares with her predecessors Sherrie Levine and Alfred Stieglitz, and even Richard Prince, the desire that art will offer something more than life can provide, and like them, she is severe in the economy of her gesture, refusing to admit anything superfluous into her works. The work is supremely elegant in that nothing is out of place or wasted, and appropriation is the simplest way to show the elements, again, so that we can see them afresh.

Facing page: *heteronyms (Spiritual America)*, 2016, detail



exquisite corpse no. 9, 2011, *Playboy* centerfolds, tape, 11" x 23" each

Exquisite Corpse

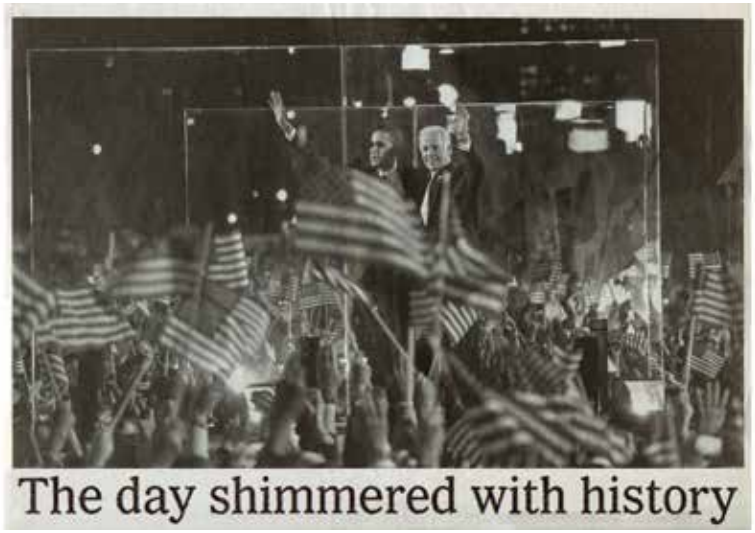
Linden shares the strategy of appropriation with many other feminist artists, as appropriation continues to be used neither to bracket nor suspend the referent but instead to problematize the activity of reference. Most of these artists work with the existing repertory of cultural imagery—not because they either lack originality or criticize it—but because their subject, feminine sexuality, is always constituted in and as representation, a representation of difference. It must be emphasized that these artists are not primarily interested in what representations say about women; rather they investigate what representation *does* to women.

It is precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that Linden's appropriations are staged—not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting, or invalidating others.

"I use appropriation to make works that undermine themselves. I want to put a picture on top of a picture, or a text on a text, so that there are times when both pictures disappear and other times when they're both manifest; that vibration is basically what the work's about for me—that space in the middle where there is no picture."

That middle: Realizing that you will have to go elsewhere to find a silence that corresponds to you. This is no doubt what being contemporary is all about. Artists share the same quality of silence, expressed according to different accents and sensibilities, and through these silences their background and vision of the world appear.

Facing page: studies for the *exquisite corpse* series, 2015, studio documentation



Cartoon (11/05/08, from text by Adam Nagourney, photo by Ozier Muhammad), 2008, archival pigment print, 30" x 20.8"

Cartoons

One day, I had lunch with Linden. "When skill is out of the picture, and it is in most of my works, then you're left with the concept," she said. "My metaphorical cutting and pasting is an acknowledgement of this. The moving of information is an artistic act in and of itself."

A contemporary artist, operating what Linden calls "an art machine," is more collagist than an artist in the customary sense. "Context is the new content. How I make my way through this thicket of information—how I

manage it, how I parse it, how I organize and distribute it—is what distinguishes my work from someone else's." At lunch, Linden describes appropriation as quotation, a Trojan horse: "The quotation is a disguise at its most efficient and perhaps at its most extreme. Quotation, moreover, offers one of the great advantages of disguise: license to express oneself in terms otherwise impossible."

Facing page: *Cartoon (10/28/10, from text by William K. Rashbaum, photo by the Federal Bureau of Investigation)*, 2010, archival pigment print, 20"x30"

signs (Atlanta), 2014, live Phalaenopsis orchid in pot, found artificial Phalaenopsis orchid in pot, dimensions variable, detail

Signs

American art of the present is situated at the crossing of institutions of art and political economy, of representations of sexual identity and social life. More, it assumes its purpose to be so sited, to lay in wait for these discourses so as to riddle and expose them or to seduce and lead them astray. Its primary concern is not with the traditional proprieties of art—with refinement of style or innovation of form, aesthetic sublimity or ontological reflection on art as such. And though it is aligned with the critique of the institution of art based

on the presentational strategies of the Duchampian readymade, it is not involved with an epistemological investigation of the object or a phenomenological inquiry into subjective response.

Linden uses many different forms of production and modes of address (photography, collage, monoprints, digital prints, artist's books, video, critical texts, sculpture, installation, collaboration, performance, etc.), and yet all her works are alike in this: each treats the public space, social representation or artistic language in which she intervenes as both a target and a weapon. This shift in practice entails a shift in position: the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular.

However faced with such a reading, Linden is quick to emphasize the humor in the work: "While, yes, my work is fundamentally

concerned with making power structures visible, it is important to me that my work doesn't alienate the viewer, which is why I work with very familiar content. I share that with other artists using appropriation. We play with the signs and images of the commercial world, which have formed all of us since we grew up watching television and being online. Art changed, for us, from being something weighty and formal and self-important to art that was more playful: fast, ironic, even cartoon-like."

Linden likes to think of her work as diagrammatic, directing viewers' attention elsewhere. In a blunt, "stupid way," she says—adding, "I'm not afraid of stupid"—it serves "a conscious effort in my art to get at the act of looking. Luckily this gets all messed up, because I don't want my work to be literally about any one thing." I deduce a stratagem: one thing in thought that is another in reality, forcing a pause in the information tornado of our time. "At first," she explains, "the critics didn't

realize that my works were factual. They weren't made up. Nothing I've ever done was made up because I felt if I made it up, it was inferior."

These works display, usually on their surfaces, the maleficent estrangements that are overtaking the present; they also show, usually through studied indirection, openings toward the creation of beneficent values, however odd or unlikely they may at first seem. These are the two great things art can do, and do at the same time. Art does so both as overt showing and as inference, as a kind of withholding that slowly unfolds, from within its processes. These practices are its "truth," one that does not exist within categories, or between them, but uncategorically.

Facing page: *signs (Atlanta)*, 2014, live Phalaenopsis orchid in pot, found artificial Phalaenopsis orchid in pot, dimensions variable


BLAH
BLAH
BLAH


surfstreetpress.com.au

Target Practice
by Jessica Michael

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Creator:	Michael, Jessica, author.
Title:	Target practice / by Jessica Michael
ISBN:	9780994547811 (paperback)
Subjects:	Linden, Liz. Artists--United States. Art, Modern--21st century.
Other Creators/ Contributors:	Linden, Liz, artist.
Dewey Number:	709.2

Printed in Ulladulla, NSW

Jessica Michael's *Target Practice* is a monograph on the work of artist Liz Linden.

SURF ST press
ISBN 9780994547811

SURF ST press
surfstreetpress.com.au

Reflections on the Word 'Image'
by Liz Linden

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978-0-9945478-3-5