

Two Comparative Reviews & Some Talk of Conceptualism  
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Jonathan Gitelson: Social Studies  
Peter Miller Gallery  
September 10 – October 23, 2004

Down Time: New sculptures and paintings by Stephanie Brooks  
Rhona Hoffman Gallery  
September 10 – October 16, 2004

Stephanie Brooks: “Untitled (Vulgarity/Vulgarity)” 2004 Acrylic panels, screen print

A Funny thing conceptual art is; either intentionally, or as laughing stock. I have always had such a weird relationship with conceptual art. Back when I was a “serious painter,” in the naïve Modernist sense, the young art student sense, a friend and I made intense works, the kind you’d have to refer to as “canvases.” To us, conceptual art hardly meant much. Conceptual art was the jokes we’d come up with while taking a break from being heroic and abstract. “Wouldn’t it be funny if I glued a painting face down to the floor for my next critique?” “Ha-ha. That would be totally stupid! You should totally do it!” He always was always funnier. Of course, I can’t recall any of the specific ideas, and I had to just make that one about the painting on the floor. Later I became more open-minded, and realized that most of the ideas we came up with were a lot more interesting than the paintings we slacking off from working on.

Then I fell in love with conceptual art. But I looked at it as suggestions for me to do. I would see a piece by Douglas Gordon that was a list he’d made, conceptual art seems to have a lot of lists, the list was the names everyone he’d ever met. I immediately thought that that was a brilliant idea and I should go home and do that. I never really thought of it on his terms, as Art, but more like he was saying, “go home and make a list of every person you’ve ever met.” I think that it is much more effective in that way. It makes you think about your life, the people who’ve come and gone in it. It’s a good way to guide a viewer towards introspection. But in actuality, I think the piece is probably about narcissism, and him taking a trip down the conceptual memory lane of self-discovery and self-de-construction. You’re supposed to be awed by that, not have the gall to think that you can do it too. Another example would be Joseph Kosuth and his definitions of words as art. It makes me want to go and look up words in the dictionary as art, too. Again, I think it is unlikely that Kosuth is trying to inspire us all to acquaint ourselves with the wonderful world of words. These are examples of me failing to meet the art on it’s own terms, or the art

failing to rise above academic masturbation. Skee-wert.

Jonathan Gitelson's current at show at Peter Miller does not make me think this way. When conceptual art is effective, you don't even really think that it is conceptual art at all. You don't think about idea-ism, you think about the particular ideas being presented.

Old conceptual art, i.e. the chapter on the time period "Conceptual Art" in the history books, very rarely does this. Actually new art that is conceptual, is just art that has deep concepts behind it, and probably isn't Conceptual Art (with the capitals) at all. Historical Conceptual Art is only appreciated by art students, teenagers trying really hard to be introspective, and academicians. When I think of historical Conceptual Art, I can really only appreciate it when I'm not thinking it is a list of suggestions. And even then, I don't really think of it as art, but more as a historical thing to respect, a precursor to "Contemporary Art." It's a context, the dismal documentation of a really icky period in history. It's my shortcoming, but it's how I feel. Except sometimes I feel like conceptual art is totally awesome. It's funny the way deep artists as such, decry such filthy things as "cartooning" and "illustration." A lot of conceptual art seems to be illustrations for misunderstood philosophies. But for the most part it is pretty hard to be excited about a circle made of sand or chalk or whatever on a gallery floor.

So at one end of the spectrum you have old school Conceptual Art, that is about being minimal and poetic and esthetic, but self-conscious enough to be doing away with modernism. And doing away with the art object, unless it is doing away with everything but the art object. And then you have new conceptual art that can be any sort of art, and is drawing from old Conceptual Art, history, popular culture and any and everything else it wants.

It is interesting then, that on the first floor of the glorious 119 Peoria building is Stephanie Brooks at Rhona Hoffman representing the old school conceptual. Post-minimalist-ness, and upstairs at Peter Miller is Jonathon Gitelson. Gitelson isn't really a conceptual artist, it's that new sense where an artist is using conceptualism as a tool.

The similarities and differences worthy of comparison and contrast between Stephanie Brooks and Jonathan Gitelson struck me when I noticed how similar his artist books are to her zinc plates: thin objects on thin shelves, leaning against the wall. Brooks' are text sculpture image things, and Gitelson's are books, but they still function as sculptural objects when displayed on the shelves. "A Book that Changed my Life and Another One," cherry wood stand-ins for books-as-objects by Brooks, are quite nice pieces, but I prefer Gitelson's as they are nice art objects, but actually are books and contain information inside.

The ultimate goofiness of conceptual art—a prime example of why so many, both in the art community and not, are baffled, stupefied, incensed, nonplussed and left incredulous by conceptual art—is Brooks’ “A Close Reading of Poe.” It is a triptych of etched zinc plates containing the letter “O.” These are special “O’s” however, they are the “O’s” from Edgar Allen Poe’s the Raven. In case you want to read the poem in it’s entirety, with all 26 characters of the alphabet, the gallery has a copy on hand. Is this a joke? It seems too austere and serious to be funny, with it’s pared down Braille-style esthetics. So we are either intimidated by it for not understanding what the big deal is, or we laugh at it because it is too stupid. Perhaps if I sat down with a copy of the Raven, it would all become apparent, but I’m not going to. And I shouldn’t have to in order to “get” the piece either. If that is the case, why didn’t she just write “you should read ‘The Raven’ by Edgar Allen Poe, a copy is available up front,” on them?

Another similarity between the two is the use of the mechanics of comics. The system of speech bubbles and panels, in the art of Brooks and Gitelson respectively shows another way how comics have influenced fine art. In conceptualism, diagrams and directness are important, so when Brooks has a series of diptychs of words, simply being on panels shaped like word balloons indicates to the viewer that these are spoken in conversation.

Gitelson uses the system of comic strip grids (a new manifestation of The Grid!) to present his data in “Social Studies.” Like a page layout in a newspaper, magazine, or instruction book, we find out different people’s explanations as to the significance of sneakers slung over telephone lines in “What Does it all Mean?” The picture, “Shaking Hands With Chuck-O-Luck,” not only tells the narrative of the complex greeting, but also is instructive in the way an airplane escape manual is. Or, rather, Andy Warhol’s dance-step paintings are. You’re not actually looking at the poster to learn how to shake hands or dance, you’re just thinking about it. By the way, the frightened, confused look in Gitelson’s face in that piece is the single best image in the show. It kind of sums up a lot of the emotion, humor and skill presented in “Social Studies.”

For the record, I’m hard on Stephanie Brooks’ Edgar Allen Poe piece because I do think it sucks, but that doesn’t mean I don’t like her work. I think the cherry wood book-objects are really amazing in their minimal esthetic and concrete object-ness. The best pieces in her show, both as things and as concepts, are the pairings of word bubbles. A series of contradictions, like arguments: “poetry/prose,” “sonnet/horoscope,” “sorrow/sublimation,” and the delicious exception. “vulgarity/vulgarity.”

So what is Gitelson doing? He has created an amazing body of work in a variety of mediums that takes a look at society. He does this in a way that is refreshingly unpretentious, and humorous. His work is very funny and a joy to

spend time with. But you come back for more, like a good book or movie that requires multiple viewings. So you watch the videos a couple of times, and you read through the books a couple of times. You also look intently at the poster pictures, which are the gem of the whole lot. Gitelson is too involved in craftsmanship and process, too invested in visual experience to be a proper conceptual artist. But “conceptual” seems like an apt placement. He is telling us stories, and giving reports. Maybe these days we’re all a little conceptual. You just don’t do any one thing purely. Even if one posits them self a traditional painter, in order to make work effectively, they must have a clear conceptual understanding of what it is they are doing and why.

In the jr. high or high school way, Gitelson has made a book of investigations into the craziness that is our modern world. Of course it doesn’t explain the world, the purpose of “Social Studies” is to probe into the urban everyday with a sense of wit and cleverness that is just the top layer of a complex cake. Gitelson is sincere in his efforts and I thank him for it. He has come up with a body of work that sets out on a conceptual art odyssey that leading through life in a Situationist type way. In “The Ballad of Carl Wilson,” a book-and-tape production, he maps out the journey of a lovable tramp character as he recounts the stories of the journey he is on. Instead of doing this as exploitation to prove a humanist point about society, he does it to allow Carl Wilson to share his story. Gitelson recedes to the role of mouthpiece. Which is ultimately more effective than a do-gooder Ad Council message. The question of race and class does come up, but he was very conscious in the process of creating the piece. Open from the start, Gitelson let Carl Wilson know the potential the interaction had of becoming art. Jonathan has since sent him a copy of the “Social Studies” catalogue.

Another example of his Situationism, more pragmatic than Debord, is “Scavenger Hunt,” a found list becomes the catalyst for an adventure through the city. In many, but not all, of these works, Gitelson becomes a stand in for the viewer. A confused outsider, an objective documentarian conducting research on urban rituals. Such as the poster pieces looking at greetings, “Shaking Hands with Chuck-O-Luck,” and why the hell people throw tennis shoes tied together over telephone cables, “What Does it All Mean?”

The most interesting thing is that instead of presenting the results of these conceptual inquiries in the stock black, white, and gray, Gitelson makes them into beautiful art objects. These stunning posters combine the best of Gilbert and George, Chris Ware and a little of Soviet poster artists the Stenberg Bros. The way he blends all sorts of various sources of influence, Chris Ware and Michel Gondry, is what excites the most. Both Gondry and Ware, are artists who are on the edge of popular culture. They oscillate between the mainstream of comics and music videos, but with a fine art sensibility they freely enter the Art World. Jonathan has cited both Gondry and Ware as heroes. Their influence is

present–Ware more so than Gondry–but not derivative.

It is also interesting to see how one idea can be expressed in different ways. For “I Wave in front of Every Apartment I’ve ever lived in Except for one,” Gitelson gives us with a book that depicts just that through photography. But also in a video, several frames of 8mm films pop up in a grid, showing him, in home movie style, giddily waving to us, except for one, which is a projector running with out a reel of film.

Gitelson is indicative of the New Form artist: not a photographer, not a videographer, not a draftsman, writer or designer. But just an artist. One who uses mediums which interest him, mediums which best express his ideas. A unique gesture, one of many facets, but a single one nonetheless. “Social Studies,” is ultimately a multi-media portrait of life today. Without pretentious agenda, the exhibition shares life experience in a way that uplifts and heartens. Something we need more and more these days.

(Erik Wenzel is an artist and writer.)