

Don't Confuse Your Conceptualists:  
Text, Humour and Conceptualism

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## **Abstract**

This essay considers humour and contemporary art practice as cultural forces, through which the expression of the intangible is possible. These ideas are examined through my recent works: *Everything I Know About History...*, an installation in advertising space; *Don't Confuse Your Conceptualists* and *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work*, large vinyl wall text installations; and the artist books *Synopses*, *Missed Connections*, and *Excerpt*. Related to imagination, humour and art practices have the ability to access something vital that is beyond the reach of language alone. I consider French philosopher Henri Bergson's theories of humour, determining the function of humour to be human and social, while looking to the contemporary poet Kenneth Goldsmith to further my understanding of conceptual writing practices. Early conceptualism is defined as a precedent for my practice. Mirroring and reframing existing content, repetition, humour, and self-reflexivity are strategies I use to make artwork in a post-conceptual trajectory.

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## Introduction

I consider my practice to be an act of cultural engagement, mirroring aspects of everyday life as a way of reframing an idea of the original to expand old meanings and convey new possibilities or understandings. I utilize conceptual strategies in my artwork to make connections between the past and present using text and ideas to reveal the comic or fragile nature of the human condition. These appropriations of conceptual strategies pertain specifically to those practices that became prominent from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s; practices that engaged the conversation around the dematerialization of the art object, the linguistic turn in artistic practice, and freedom from pictorial representation. I employ an allegorical approach for its ability to offer multiple ways to consider one subject. My intention is to create opportunities for criticality, subversion, and the possibility of new meanings from histories and ideas that seem to have an accepted or recognised status. The artworks I am currently focusing on act as refusals of values that reflect the ways we consume text and popular culture. The structure of these artworks offers an oblique distillation of the familiar.

Often I use an element from everyday life and display this without altering the content, but shifting the context, scale, or focus, to offer it back to the viewer in a different form that provides new interpretations of the subject. A sub-text to this research is the consideration of conceptualism<sup>1</sup> and conceptual writing<sup>2</sup>. I play with the pervasive

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<sup>1</sup> I am privileging the term conceptualism over Conceptual Art to be clear that I am interested in conceptualism as it manifested itself globally and not only in Western Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s (Heiser, *Moscow* 5).

<sup>2</sup> Conceptual writing is a movement within literature that has become prominent in the early 2000's. It does not share the history of conceptual art; rather the methods employed are analogous – such as appropriation, redaction, translation, and transcription.

influence of conceptualism through homage and reference, taking as inspiration early conceptual frameworks such as self-reflexivity,<sup>3</sup> questioning the nature of art itself,<sup>4</sup> works that consider the nature of – and are often critical of – their context,<sup>5</sup> and constraint-based methods of creation.<sup>6</sup>

Humour is a main tenet of my practice. I place an emphasis on the ironic and the deadpan, as well as the more intangible aspects of humour itself – its indescribability, the mystery of what makes us laugh and exactly why. Early on (in my first year of this degree) I was playing with a text that read, “The best way to kill an artwork is to explain it” – this is working off of the adage “The best way to kill a joke is to explain it”. This is a small but apt example of the way humour and popular culture are used within my practice. The example above, like much of my work, reworks an existing piece of recognizable culture (the quote) while placing it in an unexpected context (often humorous) and using these things together, ultimately plays with self-reflexivity and considers the nature of art itself (the conceptual framework). The philosopher Henri Bergson’s text *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* considers the social nature of humour and the dependant relationship between humour and humanity. This essay was published in 1911 and while the theories are reflective of a time gone by, laughter and humour are considered to be traits that are intrinsically social and therefore human which still remains relevant. “To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society” (Bergson 5a). Some of my artworks evoke impressions of specific people, groups, or other artworks; for example *Missed*

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<sup>3</sup> I am considering here a particular conceptual attitude that valued self-reflexivity, especially precedents set by artists such as Robert Barry, Luis Camnitzer, and Lawrence Weiner.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Kosuth provides a strong precedent for this value. See Kosuth 163-169.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper, and Michael Asher are apt examples.

<sup>6</sup> Evoking artists such as John Baldessari, Vito Acconci, and Hanne Darboven.

*Connections*, an artist book, is made from content posted by Craigslist<sup>7</sup> users that related to the Occupy Wall Street protests. The social is a concern that allows the humour in the work to function, and highlights the social nature of the circulation and distribution of art and ideas. Artwork itself, as an idea, is scrutinized. One of my large wall text installations, *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work*, considers when the realization of an artwork is validated: is it in its original existence, its possibility to exist later, or in its idea alone? I am interested in the nature of art – what it takes for a work to become an artwork, and what it means to be taught to be an artist.<sup>8</sup> The ideas I put forth are in opposition to the notion of a fixed identity and in allegiance with the valuing of the fleeting and the ephemeral.

I find myself examining conversations around mirroring, reframing and offering new considerations where old or cemented meanings seem to have foreclosed possibilities. I locate my works within the trajectory of allegories; I use this term to denote a way of expressing a meaning through something (a story, a text, a poem) that also has a separate literal meaning. Franz Kafka's writings are a good example of allegorical writings, and the kind of allegory attributed to the writing depends on who interprets it (whether it be read as psychoanalytic, religious, or social, etc.)<sup>9</sup> Allegory is a way to express multiple ideas at once, and creates a possible site for textual complexity. These works inhabit the weight of reference, allegory, and conceptual practices, often using tools from the recent emergence of conceptual writing. Robert Fitterman, a

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<sup>7</sup> Craigslist is a website of classified advertising including sections for housing, personals, jobs, items for sale, and so on. Craigslist exists for numerous cities across at least fifty countries.

<sup>8</sup> Acknowledgement of the problems of being an artist have been considered by artists working in Fluxus Dada, and Institutional Critique among others. While all of these are a part of the critical context my work exists within, they are not modes I am dealing with directly.

<sup>9</sup> In *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag outlines the many types of allegories attributed to the works of Kafka (6). Sontag highlights the role of translation and the subjectivity of the translator in the final outcome of the allegory or meanings attributed to the writing in question.

contemporary poet, and Vanessa Place, a poet and art critic, co-authored *Notes on Conceptualisms* a book considering the position and condition of conceptual writing practices. *Notes on Conceptualisms* provides insights into the significance of conceptual writing, which is a resource for my practice. This text, along with texts by the contemporary poet Kenneth Goldsmith, will be utilized towards an understanding of allegory, and mirroring and reframing existing content.

Each work<sup>10</sup> functions within a specifically chosen site, some works are more accessible within a fine-art context, (such as those which question the ontology of art itself) while other works are inserted into spaces of advertising or are in more direct dialogue with popular culture. These shifts in site point to shifts in perception, if a work would be received differently in a different space or form, something is being communicated about both the site/form and the work itself.

The historical moment of a work is an integral part of its context as well; text itself is in abundance in a way that is unparalleled.<sup>11</sup> Text, as a form of visual art, communicates differently today than it did fifty years ago. The form itself is not so transgressive and not as invested in the dematerialization of the art object, rather the form of text is a way to cloak artworks in vernaculars that are a part of regular life and mass culture, to open up the reading of the work to resonate beyond the concerns of the nature of art only. The condition of readership also shifts depending on the format the work takes. Some works are small artist books while others are large-scale wall texts. The books are intimate and relate to the rich history of artists books while wall texts are

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<sup>10</sup> I use the terms work, artwork, piece, and text piece interchangeably. These are all equal ways of connoting the output of my artistic practice.

<sup>11</sup> See Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, particularly the Introduction and chapter 1, for an analysis of this textual abundance, especially in relation to the emergence of the Internet.

within the vernacular of signage and public information while engaging another history of conceptual text art. Each presentation demands a different relationship from its viewers and a distinct kind of engagement.

Together, all of these concerns: humour, conceptualism, repetition, mirroring and reframing, self-reflexivity, and context, provide a framework through which to understand each work on its own and my practice as a whole. My thesis project proposes a way of working rather than one singular work. Indeed the project is the development of this method of inquiry, this use of text, humour and conceptualism to tap into something otherwise inaccessible; moments that touch on essences of the human condition.

**1. Humour and Text: *Everything I Know About History... and Don't Confuse Your Conceptualists***

Humour is a strategy present throughout my practice. The kind of humour I am speaking of is wry; for example, though my work is often described as funny it rarely elicits laughter. Bergson offers the following regarding the nature of humour: “For the comic spirit has a logic of its own...Can it then fail to throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular imagination? Begotten of real life and akin to art, should it not also have something of its own to tell us about art and life?” (Bergson 3b-4a). There is a cultural context that, in tandem with the ideas of each work, generates the idiosyncratic humour underpinning my practice. Humour is used to communicate in a way that can be inclusive and collective, it is a way of opening up works to a larger public – humour not only taps into what is shared by a social group (as Bergson suggests) but also provides a way for viewers to connect with the work. When you find something funny, there is something you relate to or understand about the source of the humour, you become part of the group that is in-the-know.

Humour, in my work, is used as a strategy to connect the viewer to the work in a way that lets them know they understand something, but then pushes them to consider what they know in a new way. Take my earlier example “the best way to kill an artwork is to explain it.” Some viewers would recognize the adage this text is riffing on – “the best way to kill a joke is to explain it.” For those who get the reference, the work becomes about both ideas and the power of experience verse the weight of explanation. At the same time, the viewer also considers the act of cultural reference. Viewers who do not

realize the text acts referentially still consider what explaining an artwork does to ones experience of that work.

*Everything I know about History...* is a text work that exists in the space of advertising, hiding in plain sight as an artwork. The text in its entirety says: *Everything I know about history, I learned from The Simpsons*. This text is put into the context of advertising space, on city buses and trains in Vancouver, BC. This is an ideal space for the piece as it is not at-first-sight an obvious artwork and it sits in a space often activated by ads in support of genuine pop culture.

This text relies on a kind of irony to provoke meaning from the viewer. It is clear that the text states a fallacy; it is impossible to know only history from one source. At the same time, the kinds of plays on history provided by *The Simpsons* as well as many other pop or cultural sources easily get mixed in with the knowledge we have of the world from 'more reliable' sources.<sup>12</sup> The real irony is that this work gestures towards how knowledge is assimilated in general and how this is affected by popular culture. John Storey, a professor of cultural studies, considers the weight of popular culture in ideological terms.

This usage [of the term ideology] is intended to draw attention to the way in which texts (television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films, etc.) always present a particular image of the world... Texts are said to take sides, consciously or unconsciously, in this conflict. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1978) summarizes the point: 'Good or bad, a play always includes an image of the world... There is no play and no theatrical performance which does not in some way affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience'... Brecht's point can be generalized to apply to all texts. (4)

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<sup>12</sup> I am considering here everything from understanding the AIDS crisis during the 1980s through the musical *Rent*, perceiving the struggle between Democrats and Republicans in America through the lens of Dan Savage's writings/podcasts, to developing a notion of classic literature and American history through a television show like *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.



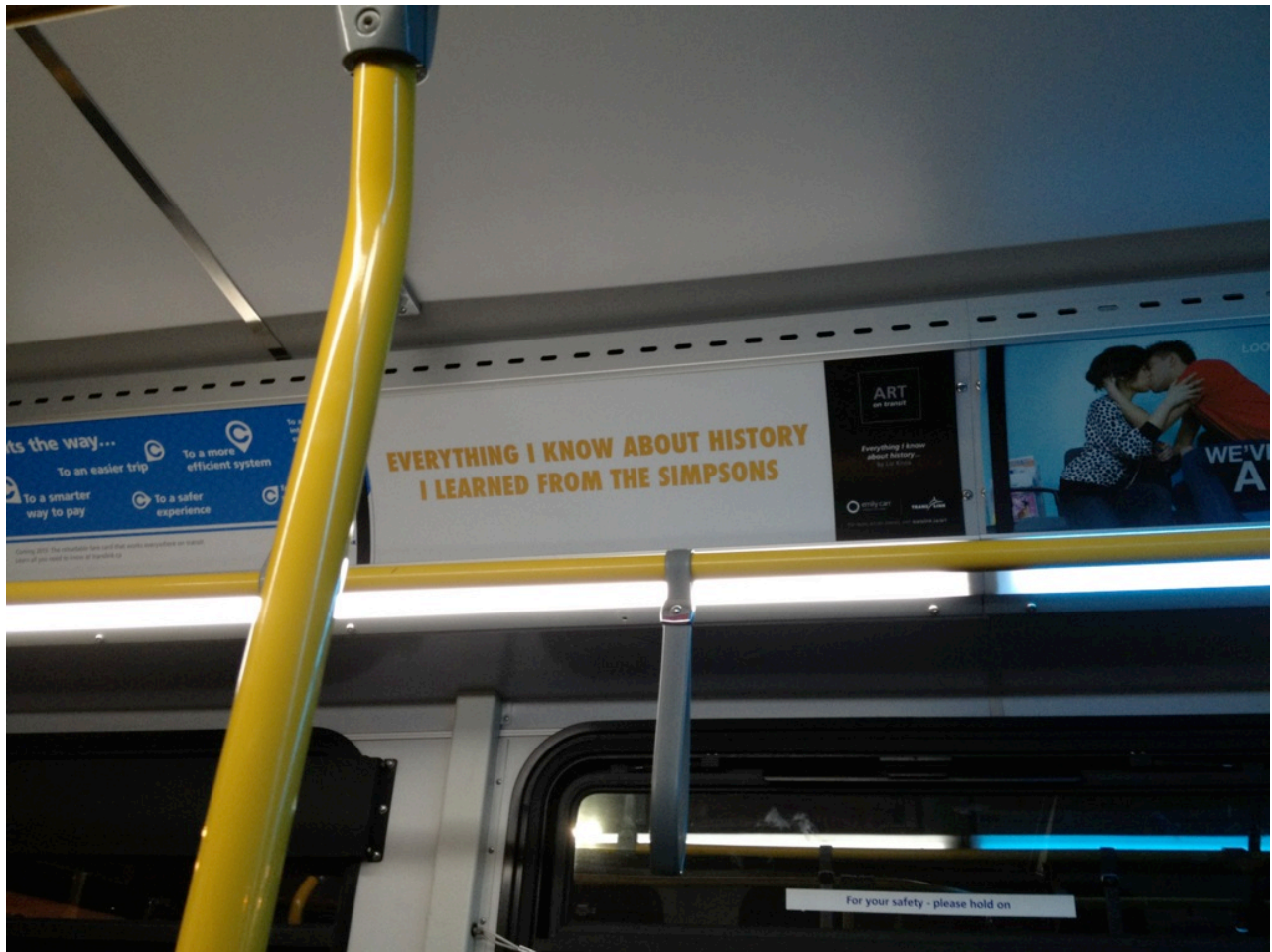


Figure 1: Liz Knox. *Everything I Know About History...* 2011-2012. Text installation in transit advertising space. 28" x 11".

My knowledge of history, especially American history, is largely influenced by fictional accounts from popular culture. While this work relies on a more subtle and idiosyncratic use of humour than that which will likely elicit laughter, Bergson's theories (which largely consider laughter) still have a relevant purchase on what I am doing. "Now we can obtain a first glimpse--a distant one, it is true, and still hazy and confused--of the laughable side of human nature and of the ordinary function of laughter." (Bergson 8a). The theory Bergson is developing in *Laughter* is an examination of humanity and that which can be considered collective among a public.

When I read Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, what I am left with is the idea that the role of humour is primarily social and human (4a-5b). Further, his theories are beyond the scope of the theory of humour I am most familiar with, which is incongruity. This is significant because incongruity theory,<sup>13</sup> while explaining an immediate reason for the existence of humour, falls short of articulating the significant human and social elements contained within the presence of humour. This is Bergson's significance; he establishes that humour exists as an intangible element that expresses the human condition: "So there is a logic of the imagination which is not the logic of reason, one which at times is even opposed to the latter...It is something like the logic of dreams, though of dreams that have not been left to the whim of individual fancy, being the dreams dreamt by the whole of society" (Bergson 15a). I work to engage this 'dream dreamt by the whole of society' (Bergson 15a) with my work, adding a human element to the dry, intellectual questions of 1960s conceptualism. At times this is accomplished through weaving together multiple voices and perspectives (found online for example). Other times, I employ familiar histories to explore their contemporary relevance. The works draw from common aspects of daily life and engage with everyday occurrences. Simultaneously pedestrian and quirky, there is something human reflected in the ideas and the works themselves.

This task of considering a familiar history in terms of contemporary relevance is taken up in another way, in *Don't Confuse Your Conceptualists*, a vinyl text-based wall work that I exhibited as a site-specific installation in a public space: the art-school library

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<sup>13</sup> Incongruity theory states that something will be humorous if it disrupts our expectations. See John Morreall, especially Chapter 3; and Jean Harvey, especially Chapter 1, for further analysis.

at Emily Carr University. The text of the piece is restated in the title, it simply directs: don't confuse your conceptualists. The act of learning and teaching art provides a standard for which art is important (and by extension which art is less so) without that role being directly acknowledged.<sup>14</sup> The text is stated as an imperative, an instruction to all those visiting the art school library. A viewer is placed into the position of being instantly confronted with judgments of the work, before fully experiencing the work.



Figure 2: Liz Knox. *Don't Confuse Your Conceptualists*, 2011. Vinyl wall text installation in Emily Carr University library. 96" x 6".

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<sup>14</sup> Critiquing the canon has been essential for other traditions that were then absorbed by the canon; post-structuralism is an apt example.

I call regularly on the conceptualists – on the history of dematerialization and the linguistic turn in art. Curator Daniel Marzona suggests a way of considering the emergence of conceptual practices when a focus was placed on the institution and art itself, and “the idea or conceptual structure of the art work began in the late 1960s to liberate itself from the material realization, which was seen by many artists as subordinate or even superfluous” (7). I am speaking in conceptualism’s visual language and am cloaking my work in the nature of its frameworks. *Don’t Confuse Your Conceptualists* for example, which calls on the nature of knowledge, also calls on art history and significance in a way that is self-reflexive – a great ideal for certain conceptualists, many conceptual works, and particularly Joseph Kosuth who wrote that art was a tautology and this was part his determination that art’s condition is a conceptual state (166). I see humour in the idea of, for example, confusing a neon piece by Kosuth with a neon piece by Bruce Nauman,<sup>15</sup> or confusing a photo of John Baldesarri with Lawrence Weiner – both being fairly shaggy-haired bearded white men it is an understandable confusion. Bergson offers an explanation for why this sort of instance is humorous, “to imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person. And as this is the very essence of the ludicrous, it is no wonder that imitation gives rise to laughter” (Bergson 12b). Stretching this idea, *Don’t Confuse Your Conceptualists* could then be seen as bringing out an element of conceptualism, through imitation, that now has a kind of automatism within it. These simple errors draw light on the larger error of art history which, in defining genres, connects a number of artists in a way that can homogenize distinct practices. *Don’t Confuse Your*

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<sup>15</sup> Nauman’s neon’s were often playing with puns, where Kosuth’s were more reflexive of the material employed and the physical, quantitative measure of the text itself.

*Conceptualists* fits easily into the framework of wall text pieces, like those of Lawrence Weiner. In calling itself out, the work considering itself within its conceptual lineage, is both imitating the past and also noting the possible automatism within post-conceptual works.

This calls to mind writings about contemporary practices that reinterpret and reproduce existing works. Nicolas Bourriaud, in his essay *Postproduction*, considers such repetitions in terms of the “proliferating chaos of global culture in the information age” (13). Curator Daniel Birnbaum’s essay *Late Arrivals* also examines the returns and repetitions of art of the past in current practices. “Repetition, appropriation, revival... Can today's repetitions be interpreted as critical appropriations of previous aesthetical models in the name of a genuine avant-garde tradition, or has today's art finally succumbed to the ongoing recycling of fashions and style?” (Birnbaum 86). My intentions are certainly not the latter but better distilled in Birnbaum’s subsequent point, which considers art historian Hal Foster who has written extensively on the return of avant-garde aesthetics or structures in contemporary practice:

When the abstract surfaces of high modernism today reappear in lifestyle magazines as well as in the art world, one clearly wants an answer to Hal Foster's query: "How to tell the difference between a return of an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return to a lost model of art made in order to displace customary ways of working?" (Birnbaum 86)

My work is not reconsidering high modernism or the avant-garde but those artists who were working in the wake of those movements. The “lost model of art made” and “displacement” (Foster qtd. in Birnbaum 86) present in my practice is a way of reconsidering the critique of the institution and art production that was being tackled by the conceptualists. Considering Kosuth’s determination that all art, to be meaningful, must consider its own nature (163) then *Don’t Confuse Your Conceptualists* is

considering what kind of currency post-conceptual practices have, in a time when making work that at least looks conceptual is the easiest way to make a piece look like art, rather than affecting transgression to push art's boundaries as conceptual practices did in the past. Because of the long and accepted tradition of conceptualism, post-conceptual artworks today, in looking like the artwork that was transgressive in the 1970s, now just look like 'art'. Conceptual Art dominates the history books and what is written about art from the 1960s and 1970s. Practices in the decades following are often discussed in terms of their relationships to Conceptual Art and conceptualism.<sup>16</sup> Dominating the discourse has put conceptualism in a strange territory, it is now something of an authority, and this authority complicates the anti-establishment point of view of early conceptualism.

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<sup>16</sup> One apt example would be the way Alexander Alberro writes about artists from Jenny Holzer to Richard Prince to Allan Sekula. Alberro notes ways that the diverse practices of these artists can be seen to follow directly from conceptualism and also challenge this predecessor (xxviii).



## 2. Reframing Existing Text: *Synopses* and *Missed Connections*

Allegorical writing (particularly in the form of appropriated conceptual writing) does not aim to critique the culture industry from afar, but to mirror it directly. To do so, it uses the materials of the culture industry directly. This is akin to how readymade artworks critique culture and obliterate the boundaries between art and life. The critique is in the reframing. The critique of the critique is in the echoing. (Fitterman and Place, 20)

Central to two of my recent bookworks, *Synopses* and *Missed Connections*, are these strategies of mirroring and reframing that Fitterman and Place contextualize. Mirroring and reframing, as they propose, offer ways of engaging with culture at a critical level, re-interrogating its purpose, meaning, and possibilities. Let's consider this again in light of Foster's considerations of repetitions and returns in contemporary art and theory: "In any case, the becoming-institutional of the avant-garde does not doom all art thereafter to so much affectation and/or entertainment. It prompts in a *second* neo-avant-garde a critique of this process of acculturation and/or accommodation" (Foster 24). Mirroring, or returning to ideas from the past, can open up an idea or cultural object that has a fixed identity and, when reframed in a new context or light, provide a new or contrary significance in tandem with the original's identity. Returns from the past, as Foster suggests, can provide a perspective that is possible only now, from the vantage point of the present.<sup>17</sup>

I am not suggesting that my work is or should be considered an update of Conceptual Art. For the purposes of this paper, when I use the term, I am demarcating a specific moment in art history. I do, however, describe my practice as being conceptual in

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<sup>17</sup> Using Foster with Fitterman and Place is an unusual pairing. Foster's view is that the task of obliterating the art/life divide is done under a false pretense; the very laying out of the binary maintains the autonomy of art. Fitterman and Place take on a slightly more romantic stance, writing about the possibility of the art/life divide to be obliterated by certain works (like readymades). While my work isn't asserting the desire to meld art and life completely (or taking that on as a utopian goal) daily life, art, and the tension between the two are my materials and subject matter.

nature. By this I mean that it is the idea behind my work that dictates other concerns (materiality, process, poetics). My work contains an affinity for, and an awareness of, the conceptual work that came before it, and often references that history. In this way I see myself within the trajectory of post-conceptual practices.

*Synopses* is an artist's book of one-page texts. These are constructed from text found on IMDb.com's<sup>18</sup> user-generated content advisory. Each page is representative of one film. The films in the book range from those produced in the 1920s to the 1970s. The subject matter of *Synopses* is at times intense, including violence, abuse, and sex. This content is mediated by the tone of each page and the tone of the book as a whole. In IMDb's advisory, there is a note advising users to simply state the facts of the films without adding an opinion about the content. This directive is at the top of the advisory for every film and reads in full:

Since the beliefs that parents want to instill in their children can vary greatly, we ask that, instead of adding your personal opinions about what is right or wrong in a film, you use this feature to help parents make informed viewing decisions by describing the facts of relevant scenes in the title for each one of the different categories: Sex and Nudity, Violence and Gore, Profanity, Alcohol/Drugs/Smoking, and Frightening/Intense Scenes.” (IMDb)

The text that is added then reads in a fairly deadpan manner; horrific events are described in a similar manner to sillier or racier events. This results in each line of text seeming to bear the same level of seriousness and weight that breaks expectations and leaves humorous moments throughout the text. There is a kind of social coding behind our mores, which this work reveals. For instance, anything that is not hetero-normative will garner more attention - indeed it merits a mention in the advisory. Take as an

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<sup>18</sup> IMDb is the Internet Movie Database, one of the major online resources for finding information about a film such as who directed or acted in a film, running time, awards, synopsis, trivia, content advisory, and so on.



A man is taking a shower.

A woman takes his clothes and gets rid of them in order to make him stay.

A leopard escapes.

A woman tries to find it.

Later she is seen with a leopard that is aggressive.

The leopard is not the right one.

The leopard does not harm anyone.

Figure 3: Liz Knox. *Synopses*. 2013. Book page. 5.5" x 8.5".

example a few lines from one page of *Synopses*: Some mildly sensual dancing from women in skin colored leotards. / A man punches another man to the ground. / A few uses of the word gay used to mean happy. The deadpan nature of the texts, combined with the familiar situations and narratives, draws a compelling picture of the characters and moments described.

The reason I rely on Bergson's theories of humour so heavily in this writing is that he develops ideas of humour as truly social and indicative of both those who find something humorous, and the social situation from which this humour arises: "... how often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group!" (Bergson 5a) He continues: "Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a SOCIAL signification" (5b). This awareness of the social requirement for humour to have its full impact is crucial. It is not only the humour that relies on the social signification, but the meaning of the work itself would not be apparent otherwise. It is not only a picture of the characters being drawn, but also a snapshot of North American popular films and by extension, the culture that is represented in, and supports, these films. The content of the advisories points to the proclivities inherent in this culture of production and consumption. *Synopses* looks at the culture of popular film through the lens of the proclivities of that culture. These strings of text are distillations of filmic narratives. The work taps into filmic memory, examining films as they have been processed through the filters of time, memory, and interpretation.

*Synopses* is a work born of an allegorical impulse, making suggestions about the human condition without making direct statements. In a significant portion of *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Fitterman and Place focus on allegorical writing. They develop ideas of

allegory as related to and contrasted with symbolism and think about allegory in relation to narrative. “Allegorical writing is a writing of its time, saying slant what cannot be said directly, usually because of overtly repressive political regimes or the sacred nature of the message. In this sense, the allegory is dependent on its reader for completion (though it usually has a transparent or literal surface)” (Fitterman and Place 13).

Rather than claiming something specific in *Synopses*, the collection of descriptions points to what is common in popular film and how this content is interpreted. All are addressed in these suggestions – characters, film-goers, content advisors, and members of the culture in which all of these others exist. Humour is again relevant; it is another way to say what cannot be said directly, though I would suggest for entirely different reasons than those proposed by Fitterman and Place. What humour allows is for that to be said that cannot fully be articulated; humour is a way of gesturing through the human condition of a specific place and time. Rather than saying what can’t be said for pragmatic reasons (like repressive political regimes), humour allows for the expression of ideas with a certain kind of intangible quality. In this way, humour is like a dream, impossible to fully explain in a way that will convey your full understanding and experience. But when experienced, dreams and humour are vivid, unique, and understandable within their own logic.

The cultural conditions of *Synopses* are those of a self-conscious present and past. Rather than a specific meaning enfolded within the work, what the allegory intends to deliver is a glimpse of a contemporary social condition. Fiona Banner’s book project *The Nam* (1997) influenced this work. The book is a compilation of the artist’s personal descriptions of well-known films about Vietnam (*Full Metal Jacket*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now!*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Hamburger Hill* and *Platoon*). Banner’s

subjectivity is forefronted and adds to the strength of the work. The reader is at once reading about a film, about a time in America of political urgency that had grave consequences, and about one woman's subjective experience of these circumstances.

What Banner accomplishes is to use these films as a way to reveal the resonance of the Vietnam War in the American psyche of the generation of those who were young adults during the 1960s.

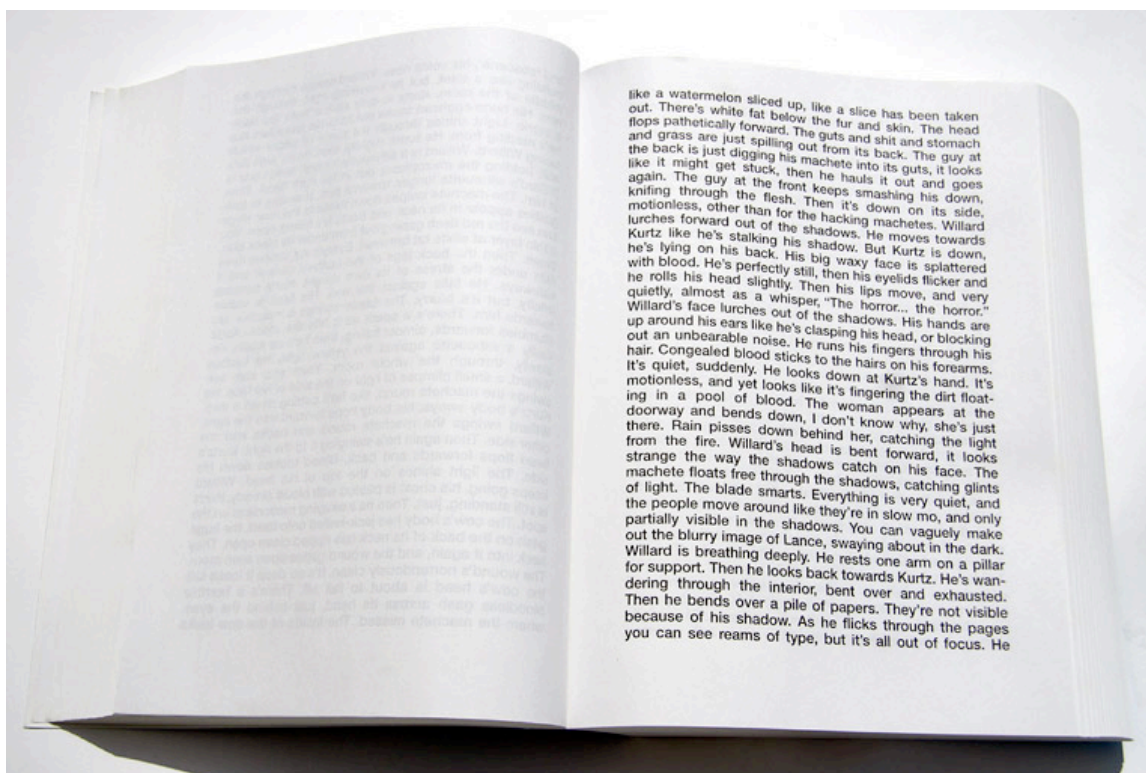


Figure 4, Fiona Banner. *The Nam*. 1997. Bookwork (detail). 11.5" x 8".  
Courtesy the artist.

I am interested in Banner's ability to use pop culture to point to other things, like interpretation, memory and cultural evolution. I work to emulate this in many of my works. In *Synopses*, my subjectivity is more stealth and contained in the reductive editing system employed (I removed text at will in creating each *Synopses* text, I did not add text except to change a personal pronoun to a generic pronoun such as "a man"). The changes

I make to the texts are subtle and relatively invisible. The reader sees the whole of the text as it is presented. My subjectivity is contained in the whole of the text rather than on single pages or in any given line of text – it is in the collection of the texts together and the overall tone, which I see as humorous. My subjectivity is also present in the overall formal decisions, the font of the text, which is that of a film script, and the format of the book itself which is generally a carrier of information and provides a personal experience. My subjective position is most evident in the underlying tone of the individual pages and the book in its entirety.

*Synopses* challenges a kind of cultural capital; I see the work as emptying the accepted value of popular films—easy entertainment, consumable narrative—and offers instead a condensed view of common narratives. As Fitterman and Place explain, “[i]n allegory, the author-artist uses the full array of possibilities—found and created—to collage a world that parallels the new production (collectively) of objects as commodity. Words are objects” (13-14).

“*Words are objects*” (my emphasis) (13-14). Words are commodities. This is something increasingly present in this Twitter, Facebook, Newsfeed RSS, “Like it”, “Share it”, “Rate it”, moment of Internet culture. Conceptual writing is a movement within contemporary literature that has been recognized and considered seriously since the early 2000’s. The movement is distinct from conceptual art, in discourse as much as in history; my interest is in the methods employed (such as appropriation, redaction, translation, and transcription) and using these within a post-conceptual art practice in order to expand my understanding of text and its possibilities. The contemporary poet Kenneth Goldsmith has written extensively on conceptual writing. In his introduction to *Against Expression*, Goldsmith considers the abundance of conceptual writing practices

with regard to broadband Internet and the materiality of language in relation to the mass digitization of language in general. Goldsmith considers the emergence of broadband Internet's impact on writing as analogous with the impact the invention of photography had on painting (*Against* xvii-xxi). He expands on these ideas further in his text *Uncreative Writing*: "In the face of unprecedented amount of digital text, writing needs to redefine itself in order to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance" (*Uncreative* 24). Goldsmith continues "there's been a huge increase in text-based forms, from typing e-mails to writing blog posts, text messaging, social networking status updates, and Twitter blasts: were deeper in words than we've ever been" (*Uncreative* 26). My project *Synopses* delves into this abundance and offers strings of text as small mirrors of the culture of popular film, the proclivities of the culture that consume those films, and the culture of user-generated content. This textual abundance is a source and fuel for my work. The increasing mass of content on the Internet and this being an ever-more ubiquitous source for everything from day-to-day tasks to entertainment to social time makes it a prime material for works considering the social and humorous sides of the human condition.

*Missed Connections*, another bookwork, takes user-generated text found online as its source material. This text is selected from the mass of content on Craigslist to frame a political movement in an ironic way<sup>19</sup>. Each page documents a 'missed connection' posted on Craigslist from October 7 to November 22, 2011 that related to the global Occupy Wall Street movement. Missed connections are part of the personal section of Craigslist, for people to post about a missed opportunity or connection with a stranger

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<sup>19</sup> This work also reflects an affinity for artist Ron Terada's series of paintings of the text from newspaper personal ads.

they were interested in, ie. “you were wearing a yellow scarf, we locked eyes on the bus, I thought we shared a moment...” The collected postings were compiled to form the content of the book. The postings are laid out one per page, chronologically and include postings from over a dozen North American cities.

These ephemeral postings, collected in book form, create an intimate opportunity for the viewer, highlighting the sincerity, vulnerability and absurdity in many of the postings. Presenting a political time period in a way that focuses on something different, tertiary, and incredibly personal provides a completely new perspective from which to consider the “Occupy Wall Street” protests. The way the “Occupy” movement figures in the work changes from page to page, at times being a signifier or proof of shared values and at other times being a simple marker of place or subject of conversation. The political potency of the time is bent and adjusted by each poster to suit their specific needs and purposes. This collection of found postings displays moments that are touching, banal, humorous, and revealing. Rather than emptying out the political weight of the time depicted, something else happens to this political agency: a human element emerges. Desires become evident, this is a quotation from one posting: “You have changed me so much. I look at music differently; I look at people differently; nothing is the same anymore.” These kinds of values, like looking at life anew, are hopes acknowledged to be possible through the relation of one person to another. This is powerful along side the weight of a political movement in which people bonded together in an effort to be heard and acknowledged.

The humorous and tragic gesture made by *Missed Connections*, much like the politics employed, is subtle and particular. Many of the postings are funny. An example from another posting is the line “Rawr, you sexy punx you.” The line itself is silly, yet

### **KMFDM at Occupy Denver 10/15 – w4m – 23**

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Date: 2011-10-17

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You had on a KMFDM shirt and stood in line at the Thunderdome with me on Saturday. Told me that you liked my tattoo and had a similar pin of it that you used to symbolize your third eye! Just wanted to say I hope to see you down there again and maybe get the chance to talk more about our similar choice in symbols. And maybe also share stories about seeing KMFDM. : )

■ Location: Lakewood

### **Blonde with Mom at Occupy SF Halloween march – m4w**

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Date: 2011-10-29

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Your sign says "End Banks' Monopoly" and "99%."

Your mom's sign says "I support the 99%" – you took a photo of her during the march.

We marched near each other and exchanged a few glances; I wore (anti-)Monopoly themed t-shirt, pants and top hat.

How about we meet for coffee?

■ Location: SOMA / south beach



the humour exists because there is a quality that transcends silliness and reveals a kind of human condition that is both endearing and embarrassing. The embarrassment functions as the humour does, it is due to its relatability – to the willingness of those who posted messages to be forthright about their desires, the all-too-humanness of the texts – that the reader can be moved to empathize with or laugh at. The overall humour of the work isn't found in any one instance of the text alone but in the format itself, in the idea of framing the "Occupy Wall Street" movement through the Craigslist personal ads section. The tension between these personal ads and protests provides a way to consider the cultural climate of 2011 with a tongue-in-cheek nod to the old adage: the personal is political. At the same time, it is not a joke at the expense of the hopes of the past. *Missed Connections* intends to explore the way that we connect to one another now. Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai describes 'this moment' as "the performance-driven, information-saturated and networked, hypercommodified world of late capitalism" (948). In this bookwork I am interested in the differences in the way politics is enacted on us – a consideration of the kind of engagement possible for an average individual today is at the root of this.

Presenting a protest through the lens of online hook-up ads wouldn't be nearly as funny in the 1960s; it is in the context of today that this gesture has the kind of weight that it does. The way political engagement is enacted now seems different than it was in the past. Kristin Ross, a professor of comparative literature at New York University, notes the following when considering the difference in the general strikes in France of 1968 and 1995: "In [Cohn-Bendit's] comparison of the two events, all of the sociobiological trappings of the '68 movement as a 'generation'—its speed, youthfulness, and forward-thinking audacity—were mobilized to create in the '95 movement their

opposite: the aging pensioner's anachronistic attempt to cling to the past" (211). Political enactment changes as society evolves. The way we engage with one another has changed, the state of protest has changed along with it. Looking back at the culture of the 1960s, protest is central in the pop songs from that time that garnered mass appeal and likewise in popular films. *Missed Connections* demonstrates that social engagement is changing and so is political engagement. This point of view is expressed through a deadpan irony.

Allegory is employed by both of these bookworks. Art historian Craig Owens sees allegory as an outmoded device: "It also denies allegory what is most proper to it: its capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear. Allegory first emerged in response to a similar sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past..." (68). In the instance of *Missed Connections*, this past is a very recent past, but fleeting nonetheless. The allegorical suggestion is that of individuals and polemic political times. In *Synopses*, the allegory functions in a more traditional manner, using texts that are in themselves interpretations of the original to reform the original and offer a new thought. The slippages in language I point to in my work and earlier in this text are fundamental to the current possibilities of allegorical works. I believe that we can read the present through the prefiguration of works and texts of the recent past. This shift in how we relate, communicate, and protest will develop and become pronounced in the years to come.

### 3. Self Reflexivity: *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work*

My practice is self-reflexive; the material and physical situation of my works are significant for the meaning of each piece. My interest in making self-reflexive work is connected to my interest in conceptual art (which traditionally is occupied with such concerns), and a sincere interest and curiosity with what I am doing, with the nature of the social – art, pop, culture – and how we relate to each other and these things. I am an artist and not a sociologist. Jenny Holzer is an example of an artist who works in the manner I am describing, exploring the social and the relationship between art and its conceptual past. Holzer’s practice has a strong focus “on the complex link between text and image, and between language and subjectivity” (Alberro xviii). Holzer pays close attention to “the construction of the subject” (Alberro xviii) from a clear engagement with discourses relevant to contemporary art and art history. Through the careful consideration of her text pieces and their placement in time and space, Holzer is able to affect aspects of the intangible side of the human condition. At the same time, from the vantage point of coming after early conceptualism, I believe she constructs artworks that are conscious of the significance of the works that came before and also of the social situation of the present. Her *Truisms* (1977-1979) are a good example, using a text statement format and, rather than destabilizing meaning, Holzer opens up the social aspect of meaning, using found texts and presenting them as truths pasted in the streets like other advertising or political posters.

For Holzer, form is important; as art historian and curator Elizabeth Smith notes: “Through her staunch commitment to the central role of language in art and her unique, inimitable approach to presenting it in various visual manifestations and contexts, Jenny

Holzer intertwines form and content to produce a potent tension between the realms of feeling and knowledge” (27). My affinity for Holzer’s practice exists because she is concerned not only with the ontology of art but also the social realm it engages.

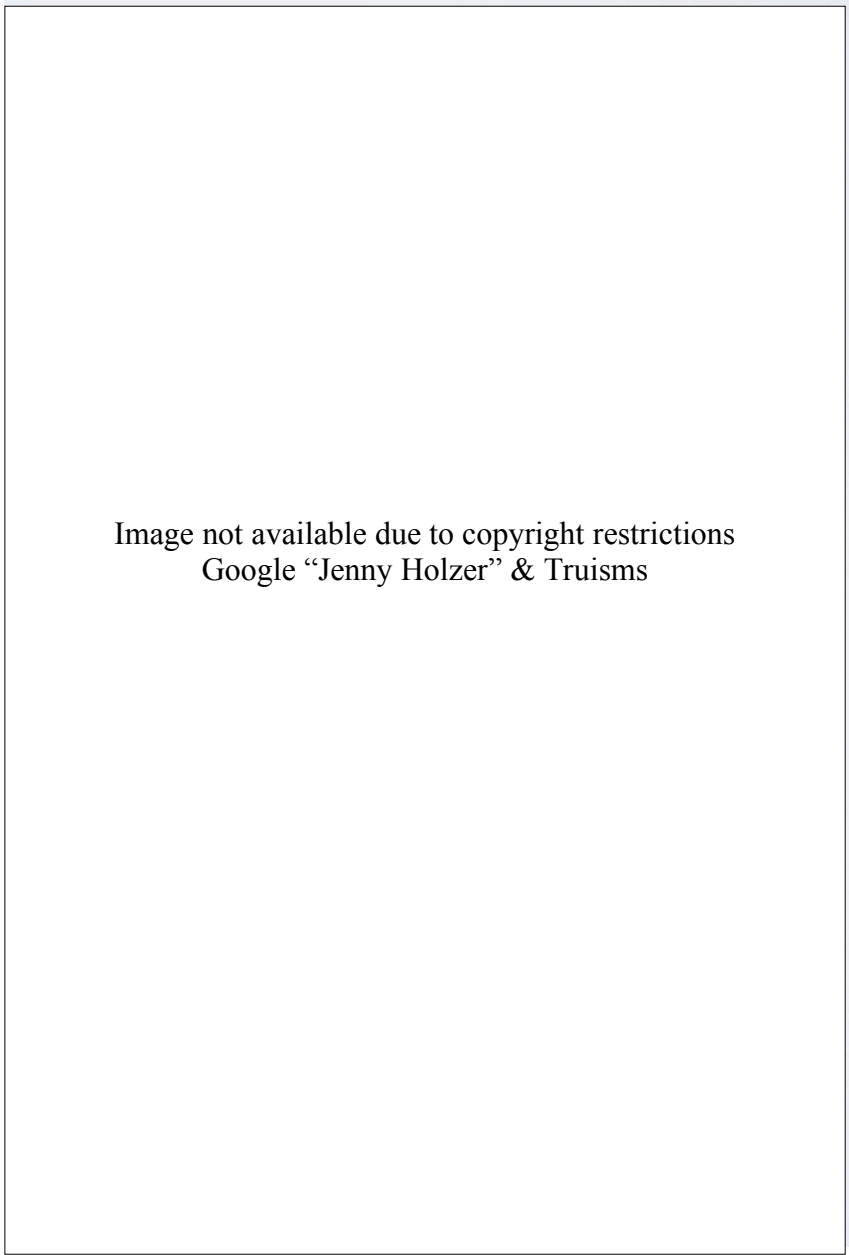


Image not available due to copyright restrictions  
Google “Jenny Holzer” & Truisms

Figure 7, Jenny Holzer. *Truisms*. 1977-1979. Offset Lithograph. 34<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>” x 23”.  
(Image removed due to copyright restrictions.)

Her work is deeply political in the way it raises questions and catalyzes thinking about the role of individuals in society and the relationship between the public and private realms. Power and vulnerability, violence and tenderness, moral struggle and depravity—all manners of contradictory motivations—are chronicled in her work as interwoven impulses. (Smith 27)

Robert Bailey, writing about Holzer for *October* magazine observes that “Holzer uses the language of others, and this adds a further layer of mediation, as historical events are presented in the voices of a wide variety of speakers and writers (28). This is significant as it makes her work about more than the propositions they contain; the works are about the culture that created the ‘truisms’ (for instance) as much as they are about the texts themselves.

My interest is in posing questions and making connections, offering potential meanings and relationships that are also cognizant of their status as art, and of their social reality. My work is not overtly political, unlike Holzer, and is more ironic or deadpan. Where Holzer may consider the role of the individual in society and the relationship between public and private (Smith 27), my work is concerned with the interaction between society or mass culture and the individual. *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work...* is a work that exemplifies these goals and desires. The full text reads:

My roommate recalls a text work she learned about in art school.  
An artist painted on the wall: I want to be a hippie but I don’t know how to love.  
It is impossible to find any information about this work online.  
So I’m not sure if it ever really existed.  
Or if it exists now.

Similar to *Missed Connections* and *Synopses*, this work uses text that is fairly specific in terms of its content and source to signal to other concerns outside of its visible/readable contents. Fitterman and Place consider this signaling in other terms: “Note that pre-textual associations assume post-textual understandings. Note that narrative may mean a

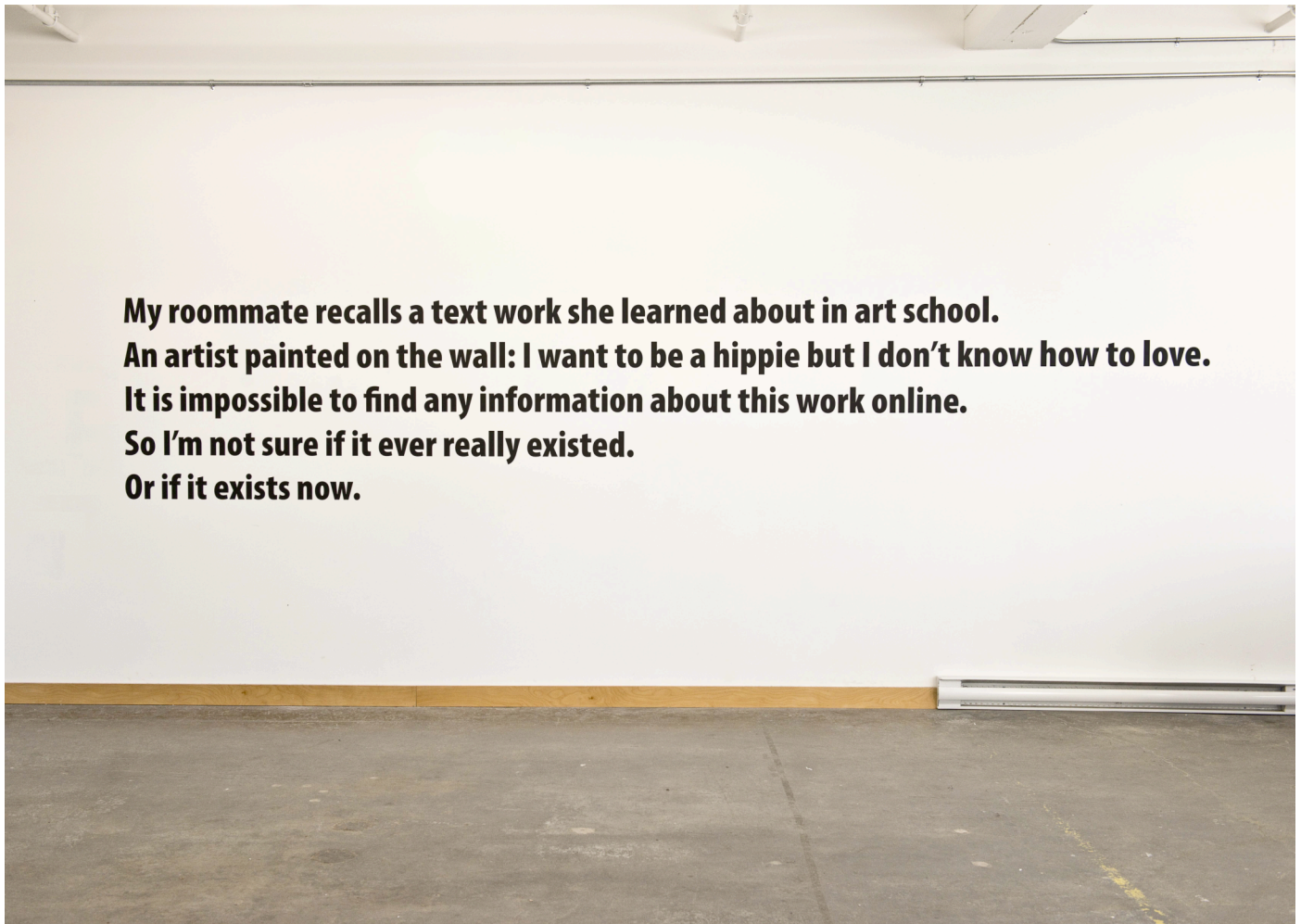


Figure 8, Liz Knox. *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work...* 2012. Vinyl wall text installation. 185" x 40".

story told by the allegorical writing itself" (15). The information being relayed in *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work...* is straightforward and meaningful in its most basic reading, but this text also gestures towards other associations and meanings. My ideal placement for this work would be to install it in the four independent art schools in Canada: Emily Carr University, NSCAD University, OCAD University and ACAD. The work in each school would have a different resonance because of the different histories of each place. For example, this text against the backdrop of NSCAD would be read in terms of the legacy of the school and the conceptual artists who visited during

conceptualism's heyday. Within Emily Carr University and Vancouver, the text might highlight west coast conceptualism and notions of 'hippie-ness' and so on.

This text work points to multiple forms of communication and exerts a tension on the relationship of this moment and the 1970s. The time of hippie culture and a longing for the past is displayed in the text. At the same time, the work asks questions of an ontological nature: What is required to be a hippie? What is required to be an artwork? At what moment does the work of art exist: the moment of conception, recollection, or visibility to the outside world? It is written in short stanzas, using the quickness and thought process common in emails, while being displayed in a form that evokes both the dissemination of pertinent information in public, and text works by early conceptual artists (Lawrence Weiner can be seen as a reference<sup>20</sup>).

In his introduction to *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro offers the following while laying down a way to understand the framework of historic conceptual practices: "In particular, four trajectories can be singled out as strong precursors of Conceptual Art. The first includes the self-reflexivity of modernist painting and sculpture that systematically problematizes and dismantles the integral elements of the traditional structure of the artwork" (xvi). *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work...* is situated outside of the realms of public information and gallery-bound work because of the nature of what it is problematizing. Rather than focusing on the traditional structure of the artwork itself, this work considers the structures around artwork, specifically the creation of work, how we learn to identify what an artwork is and when it exists and how we learn to be artists. By staying on the edge of an aesthetic reminiscent of public

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<sup>20</sup> One example is Weiner's large wall text *TAKEN FROM HERE TO WHERE IT CAME FROM AND TAKEN TO A PLACE AND USED IN SUCH A MANNER THAT IT CAN ONLY REMAIN AS A REPRESENTATION OF WHAT IT WAS WHERE IT CAME FROM* (1980).

information or standard gallery wall-text, the work can achieve a sort of neutrality and be read outside of existing constructs. Its first reading can be in the simple construct of text.

Contingent and contextual elements figure largely in how the work functions and is read. While conceptualism in the 1960s was more interested in deconstruction, my work highlights the slippages of language. There is a failure to completely, accurately communicate through language because of these slippages; communication breaks down and understanding and meaning are broadened. Referencing postwar art's expansion of historical allusions and minimization of actual content, Foster writes: "Indeed, such art invokes different, even incommensurate models, but less to act them out in a hysterical pastiche (as in much art of the 1980s) than to work them through to a reflexive practice – to turn the very limitations of these models into a critical consciousness of history, artistic and otherwise" (3). That is what this work intends to accomplish, and what makes engaging in a practice that has a relationship to conceptualism interesting to me even today.

*My Roommate Recalls a Text Work...* was installed on a wall in Emily Carr University; this location is significant to the reading of the work. It is against the large white walls of an art school that this work's meanings are provoked. My intention is to embed skepticism of the institution, and authority in general, in the text that makes up this work. The piece favours information from a Google search over what is taught within the art school. The work is intended to function in a self-reflexive manner, the reference to art school calls to light not only the way that we read artworks, but also the way we are taught to read artworks. The physical situation of the work calls to a sympathetic audience, the initial or primary viewers of the work are students within the four schools, undergoing training learning how to create something that is allowed to be called 'art'. For



a public found in a shopping centre, for example, there would be less concern or awareness of the role and function of artworks and the historical precedents at play. For the audience within an art school, there is already a kind of discourse present within which this work can resonate. This is what makes engaging with the history of Conceptual Art today so alluring; the large discourse to work against and play with, the possibility of critiquing the commodity-driven contemporary art world, and the breaking down of assumptions and expectations.

#### 4. Context: *Excerpt*

For each work I have been developing during the last two years, context and site have been significant factors for every project. There are many legacies that this interest links to. Institutional Critique<sup>21</sup> and Minimalism<sup>22</sup> are two movements that easily come to mind when considering such concerns. While these legacies are a part of the critical context within which my work exists, I am not referencing them directly in these works but instead I am interested in location. *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work...* for instance, relies on the walls of the art institution to fully resonate, as *Everything I Know About History...* has an impact in its situation, as advertising. Issues of scale are relevant, the condition of readership or ‘thinkership’<sup>23</sup> changes whether a viewer is presented with a book or a large-scale wall text. There is a tension between site and content in my works. The larger wall works exist in public space and these locations have a bearing on their reading as well as the subject of the works. ‘Don’t confuse your conceptualists’, as text on a page, functions differently than it does on the wall of a library surrounded by art history texts. The role of the social is implicated in the locations of the work. A work that exists as a book is intimate and displayed in the same form that commonly provides information. A wall text is speaking in the vernacular of public information and is social in its reception, a private or intimate viewing of this work is not guaranteed. While my

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<sup>21</sup> I am considering a way of working that started in the late 1960s and interrogated the role of the institution on art practices. Institutional Critique, as a genre, generally considers the physical, political, or social implications of the art system, actively examining the art market, the gallery or museum and the social relations that underpin these mechanisms.

<sup>22</sup> Minimalism is also a genre I locate from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The movement is recognizable for its works (most commonly sculptures) made with the minimum or only essential elements, focusing on form and the relationship of the object to the body and space.

<sup>23</sup> Fitterman and Place use this term along with readership to connote the kind of engagement being asked of the reader with the emergence of conceptual writing practices and the sort of works this form employs.

books exist within the history of artist books, my wall texts speak to the traditions of wall works and the linguistic turn in art.

*Excerpt* is a bookwork through which I will examine conditions of context and the impact this has on the engagement of the viewer. One way a text work that exists as a wall text is distinct from text work formed into a book is that wall works exist in a social space. Engagement with that space is not primarily individual, the work is viewed within an atmosphere that is social and there is the strong possibility of other viewers engaging with the work at the same time. My books demand a different kind of engagement because the experience is intimate and implies a personal understanding between the book and the person reading it.

The idea of ‘the reference’ is an undercurrent in many of these works that is contextually relevant. I am considering the use of references in the works of other artists – what they reference and how – and also the use of references from popular culture, to consider the act of referencing within the context of creating artworks. The references used define the kind of audience for whom each work will be most impactful. Further, through the way I use reference, the idea of reference within contemporary art is interrogated. Take *Synopses* as an example, many of the films used in the book are films which also have a life as a reference in the works of other artists: *Dog Day Afternoon* and Pierre Huyghe, *Cool Hand Luke* and Ron Terada, *Apocalypse Now* and Fiona Banner. *Synopses* references films, but also references other artists’ references. This is a part of my interest in self-reflexivity, considering the way that work is made and the cultural capital that is employed by other artists. This is true in a very different way for a work like *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work...* where the interest in other artists’ work is

explicit, and the tension of the cultural references (the 1970s, art school and conceptualism) is just beneath the surface.

Artist Ron Terada works with cultural reference and context plays an essential role in the final impact of his works. There is a sense of humour that is explicit within his practice as a whole, the nuances of which are developed in each distinct piece. There are strong relationships I see between our works, such as his *Untitled* (1994) series of paintings of personal ads. For this series, Terada selected a number of ads and painted each in the visual language of monochrome painting. Artist and writer Lucy Hogg explains the significance of context in his work: “The monochrome implies the generic yet actualizes itself here as specific, providing the context for the advertisement of an individual’s desires which are most often constrained to generic expression.” The context of monochrome painting develops an impression from which the viewer can begin to unpack the subtleties of the work. Terada uses references of both cultural and visual art history to reveal “in a relatively neutral fashion the systems of exchange at work in the production of an exhibition and that which then represents it...for perpetuity—thus provoking, as opposed to critiquing, discourses within the realm of institutional critique” (Low 44). Terada is constantly using expectations and forms found in everyday life to reveal the inner workings of the art system and social exchange.

*Excerpt* is a bookwork I completed in 2011, during my first semester as a graduate student studying visual art. The text functions as an excerpt of art theory, documenting eleven well-known art theory texts – the texts I was reading at the time in an effort to ensure I had the proper theoretical grounding of the dominant discourses and vocabulary relevant to contemporary art. Each text was subjected to a reductive system of interpretation; they were inserted chronologically into Microsoft Word software, and all

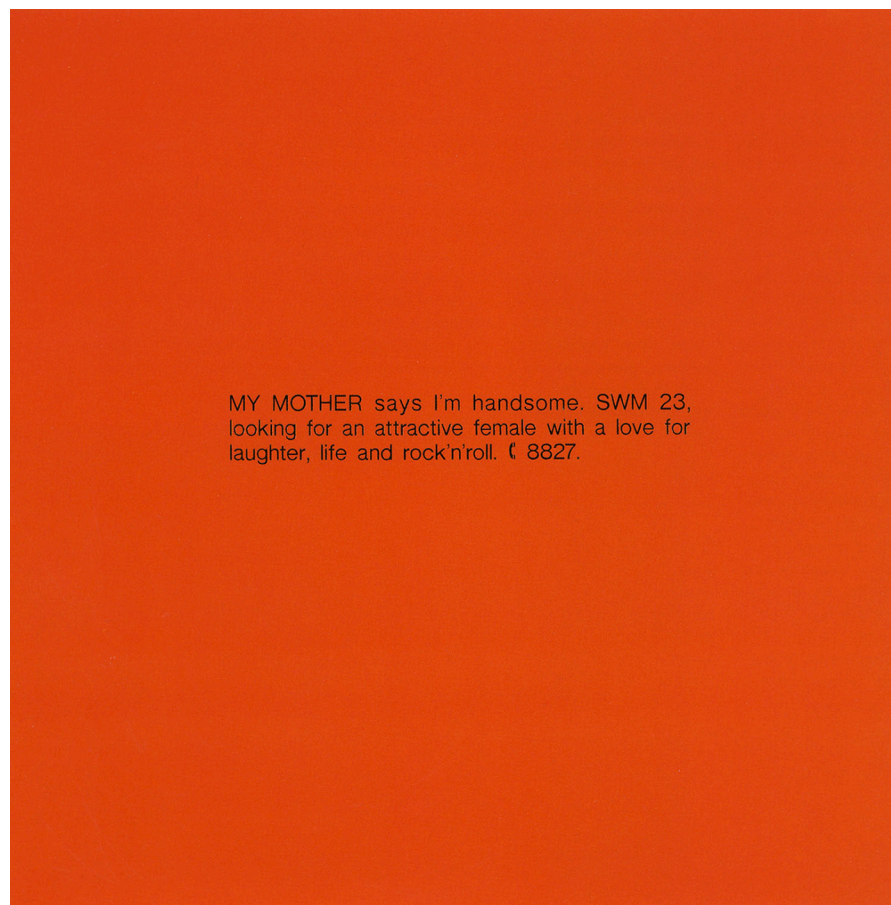


Figure 9, Ron Terada. *Untitled (My Mother)*. 1994. Acrylic on Canvas. 30" x 30". Courtesy the artist.

of the words were erased except for those flagged by Microsoft Word as spelling errors. Through certain language use, those engaged with contemporary art or theory will recognize a theorist or thinker. There is also the possibility of confusion as the nature of language is to grow and transform, so for instance, though Michael Fried may have coined the term 'objecthood', many others since have used the term. The effect of this is that it is possible to distinguish sets of concerns and terms that were significant at certain times, those that remain consistent throughout the entire book and those that fade and swell in waves. The strings of text on each page also make it possible to consider an abstract kind of narrative of art history.

*Excerpt* contains an allegorical reading of contemporary art theory. Returning to Owens: “In allegorical structure, then, one text is *read through* another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest” (Owens 69). This is true of *Excerpt*, both figuratively and (comically) in a sort of literal way. It is this literal ‘reading of other texts through this text’ through which the figurative nature of the allegory exists. I consider my work in relation to conceptualists in this way; this is part of my palimpsest. This bookwork offers a literal re-reading of art theory, only in a way that inherently forces a new understanding of the content.

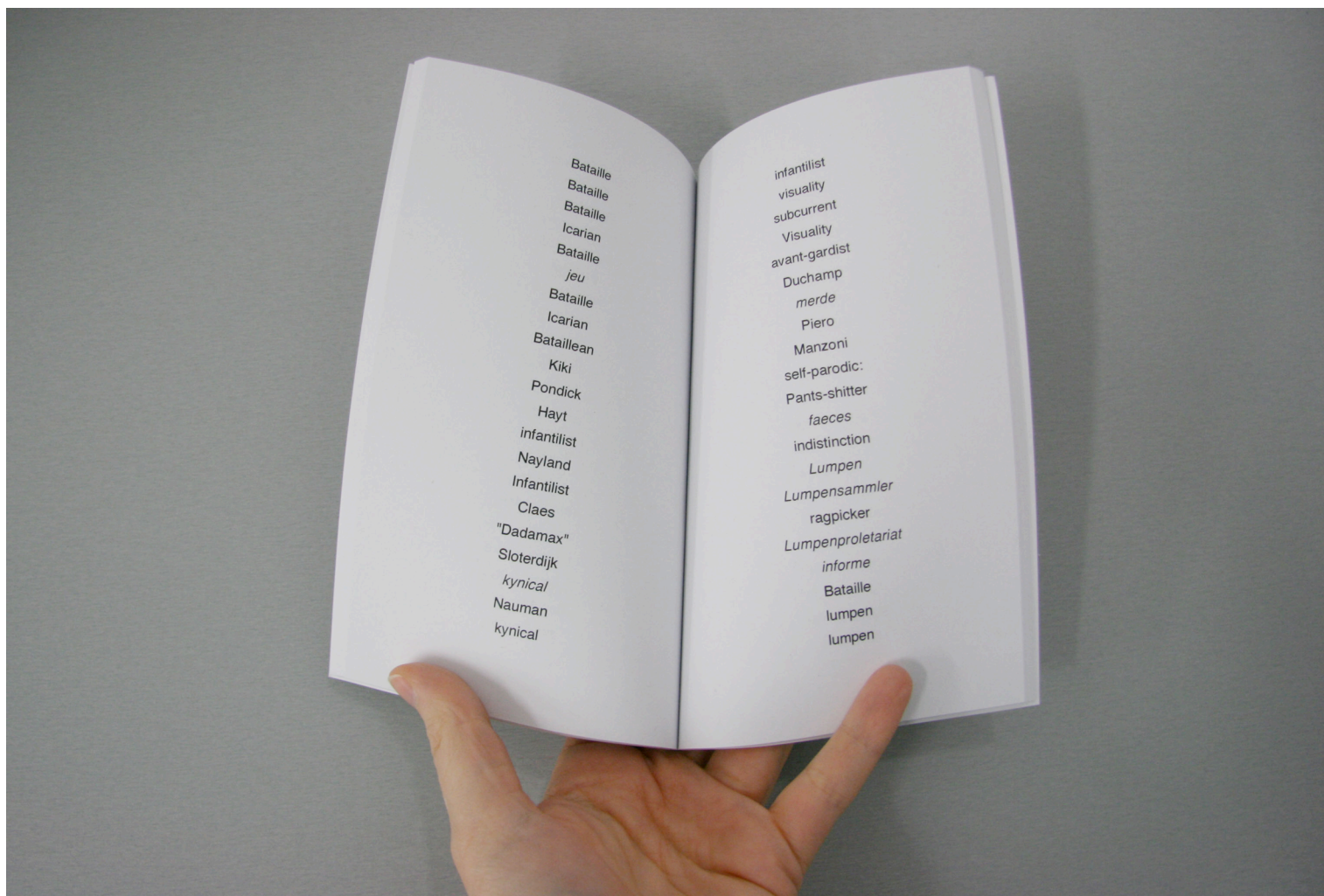


Figure 10, Liz Knox. *Excerpt*, 2011. Bookwork (detail). 4.25" x 6.87".

An attempt to read *Excerpt* in the way most other books are read would be futile. What remains on the pages of the book is a distillation of an excerpt of art history vocabulary, an ironic system for re-reading the familiar, through optics of reference and constructed language. The kind of constructed language I am referring to is, in most cases, an easily recognized word that has been added to (with a prefix or suffix) to bend it's meaning to suit the ideas of the theorist. Words like 'visuality', 'normativity', and 'avant-gardist' are three apt examples. There are instances of constructed language (neologisms) throughout the book, showing that language has never been in and of itself adequate, and will always need to be stretched at times to fully articulate a complex thought. As significant as some of the theorists are (Roland Barthes for example) the language they constructed hasn't been added to the Microsoft Word default library, though the theories have been added to the canon of contemporary thought. My word processor knows to capitalize the word 'Internet' but not the validity of the word 'punctum'.<sup>24</sup>

The humour in *Excerpt* is in part communicated through the chronological arrangement of the texts. This organization allows the reader a glimpse of the ideas, artists, and theories and their popularity and mutations over time. It is ironic for such cryptic information to be laid out in an organized manner similar to more linear documents, just as the gesture itself is ironic, to take meaningful theoretical texts and offer them back to the reader in a manner that requires an unfamiliar or unique way of decoding the available signs. Through the limited use of language (all the words in the book are 'art language,' personal names, and neologisms), certain trends or biases

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<sup>24</sup> This term is developed in Barthes seminal text *Camera Lucida* (1980). It is a concept that is used in many of Barthes texts and many theory texts on film, photography and art.

become noticeable as they swell and fade in time. One moment where this is pronounced is in the texts around the early 2000s, where names such as Bourriaud, Gillick, and Tiravanija are constant hiccups across a number of pages, these moments offer the reader the awareness that this is happening in even more subtle moments all through the text. The reader can also consider the pattern of names that come up, Michael Fried for example doesn't appear in the book as his name is Anglo Saxon whereas less common names (Ansel) or names that are more common in a language other than English (Pasolini, Lacan) are dispersed throughout the book. *Excerpt* highlights a wide array of names that may be 'foreign' though the person represented is most commonly an accepted member of the art or theory canon.

The book excerpts moments in art theory from the late 1960s to the late 2000s. Context is especially noticeable in the instance of this work as the public that *Excerpt* will have the most resonance with is a public who is concerned with contemporary art. Comparing this work to *Everything I Know About History...* highlights the contextual difference called for from the content of each work. A text piece that would be most meaningful to members of a contemporary art community or those familiar with art theory would be less effective in a public advertising space - there it would seem at best like an inside joke and at worst like alienation. *Everything I Know About History...*, simply by referencing something as widespread as *The Simpsons*, has a much broader audience than *Excerpt*, which is embedded with references that are meaningful and relevant to a smaller niche group of people. What I find compelling about the content of the book, is that the text places a focus on words specifically chosen to express how standard language is ill-equipped to communicate and what has formed the basis of the diction we use to discuss art today.



Books comprised of lists by artists such as Claude Closky and Gerald Feguson<sup>25</sup> provide a historical precedent for *Excerpt*. Indeed it is because books by these artists exist that *Excerpt* can take up the space it does; responding in kind within an existing dialogue embedded in contemporary art; the bookwork can function as self-referential within the art world system by which we consider works, discourses, and ideas. Where Closky is condensing meaning into a quantity and form requiring a new system for comprehension, my book is suggesting meaning from pre-existing information.

The bookworks I make offer a different experience of readership than my large-scale text installations. The book, as a form, is intimate and individual. It calls for a kind of immediate, focused, personal engagement with the text. The wall-based works are in a constant negotiation between the visual language of public space and advertisements, and the history of text works made for art spaces (Lawrence Weiner again being the most obvious example). These contextual differences set the tone for the viewer upon initial engagement with the work. *My Roommate Recalls a Text Work...* as a large installation in a public space elicits attention from those around it. This attention and understanding of the work would shift once the viewer is aware that the text is installed verbatim in three other art schools.<sup>26</sup> Likewise *Excerpt*, as a book, considers the origin of its content as well as becoming preserved information that can be referenced.

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<sup>25</sup> Ferguson's *The Standard Corpus of Present Day English Language Usage Arranged by Word Length and Alphabetized Within Word Length* (1978) is exemplary of a list book. Closky has produced numerous artist books using the list format; books such as *The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order* (1992), *Three Thousand Four Hundred and Fifteen Friday the 13ths* (1992) and *The 365 Days of 1991 Classified by Size* (1991).

<sup>26</sup> Installation in the four independent Canadian art colleges/universities is the ideal and intention for the work, but at this point this is not the actual case.

While I do not believe that “context is the new content,”<sup>27</sup> (Goldsmith, *Uncreative* 3) I maintain that context elicits cultural significance and weight to an idea. Context is a framing device, rather than content in itself, it is a part of the work that still communicates and acts to highlight nuances within the idea itself. *Excerpt* is a book that will mean more to an audience with an art or theory background, while *Everything I Know About History...* is suited to a more pop-savvy audience. The awareness of these nuances allows me to select the context which will ignite meaning in each work. *Don’t Confuse Your Conceptualists*, installed on the walls of an art school library, was able to have an impact because of the knowledge physically and metaphysically surrounding it. *Missed Connections* is printed in an open edition unlike my other bookworks which are in limited editions; it made sense to me to have an unlimited edition for a book made with content from a protest movement for social and economic equality. *Excerpt*, on the other hand, is in an edition of 100 as this work is more specialized and in its printing acknowledges its smaller audience. These contextual elements are part of each work and are a large part of the meanings evoked by the work.

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<sup>27</sup> This was Goldsmith’s description of some young writers who use appropriation without citation (not a belief he necessarily holds).

## Conclusion

This thesis presents my framing of a body of works that share overlapping concerns rather than one work that is considered as *the* thesis project. My thesis project is the development of a way of using artistic practice to continually work and explore, through the use of humour and the ghosts of conceptualism, certain intangible aspects of the human condition that can be observed and expressed. I hope ‘the project’ then is tangible in this array of works, set within multitudinous contexts and taking different forms, all united by the use of text and reference, a concern for the importance of everyday experiences (often reflected through the words of others), and an interest in the state of being an artist.

I am privileging a way of working, of eliciting humour and a kind of gesturing as a way of approaching and considering the world around us. Creating artwork is my way to make sense of the world. As a strategy, humour offers a way to do this; to both make meaning out of the world around me and expand on the meaning that exists. I am suggesting that my practice is more about a methodology than it is about a single idea. This method places a value on the found. I try to garner meaning out of the abundance of text, images, and ideas that surround me each day. Rather than offering conclusions, I’m offering possibilities and platforms for meaning. Allegory is significant to this; it allows for works to be what they are and still gesture at what could be. Meaning is presented as hyper-abundant, contingent, fragmentary, and relative. What is left but to construct meaning of your own? My work highlights irony and uses this as a tool to begin to construct paths for alternate meanings.

The form each work takes is specific and is connected to particular histories and

traditions. Some of these are related to contemporary art history, while others are situated within web or film culture. The references used in some cases intend to open the work up to a broad audience while in other cases speak in a specific manner to a more niche viewership. My practice allows the past to constantly overlap into the present by framing the past in humour that is possible from the vantage point of now. This humour uses the past as a stage on which to perform for the future. As Marx famously quipped, “What history plays the first time around as tragedy, it reappears as farce” (qtd. in Burgin 430).

Humour has a special property. Akin to art, this property makes possible the expression of the intangible that cannot be fully expressed by language alone. Through art and humour we can experience and understand aspects of the human condition that might otherwise be out of reach. It seems to me impossible to accurately describe the human condition – except through jest.

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