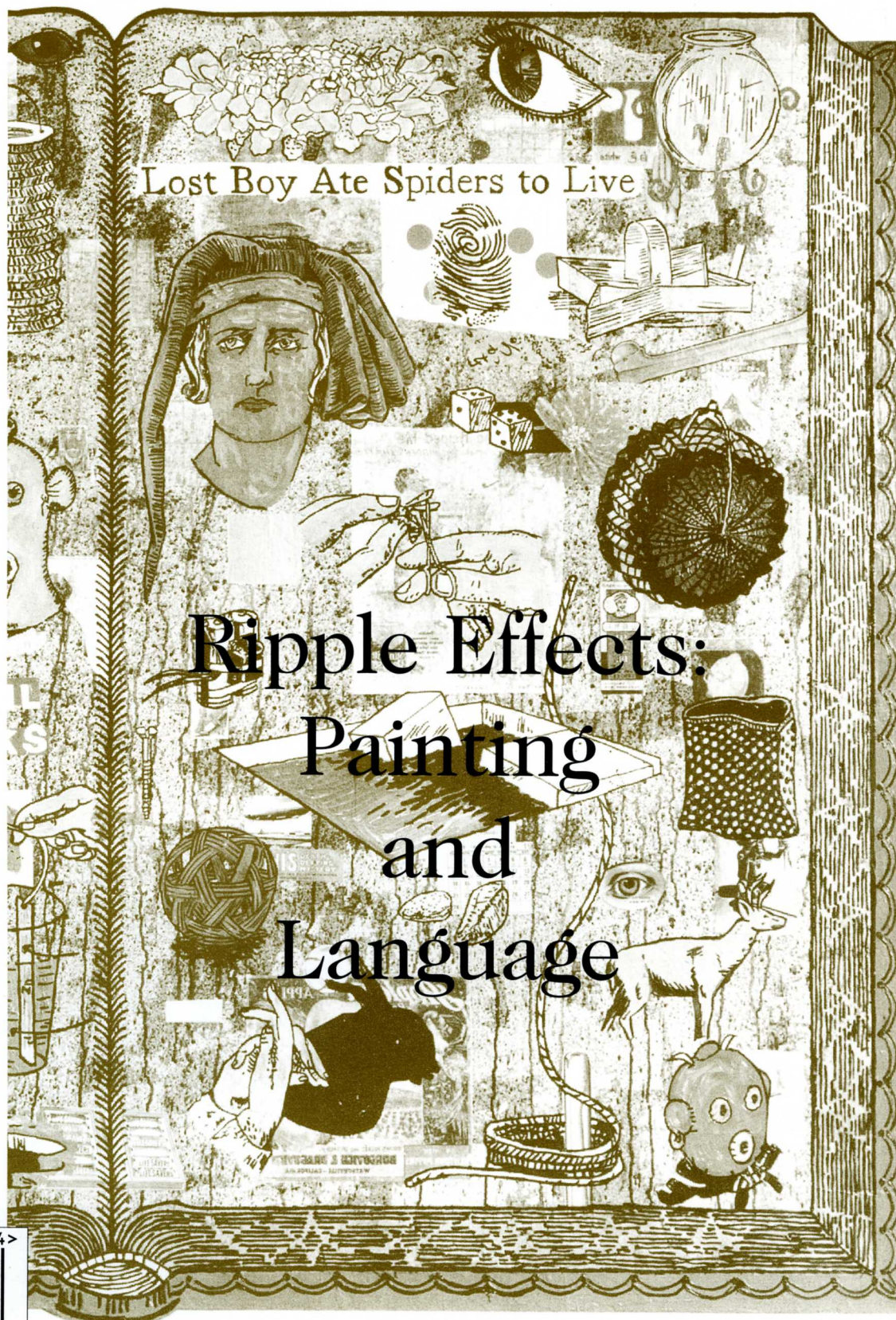


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Mira Schor

Tom Knechtel

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SUSAN BEE AND MIRA SCHOR

Ripple Effects: Painting and Language

THIS ISSUE OF *NEW OBSERVATIONS*: "Ripple Effects," examines the relationship of painters with language and other primarily linguistic source materials. Painting was traditionally an art form privileged for its purely visual qualities, although for much of its history it found its themes in linguistic sources such as biblical narrative, mythology, allegory, and history. In fact, painting and language exist in a field of interactive ripple effects that productively enrich rather than disrupt the surface of contemporary painting. Today many painters rely on linguistically based sources for their work, increasingly bringing images of these sources and of language into their paintings; also, some painters write about art or collaborate with writers, thereby engaging in a complex, multilayered practice, where art and language intersect. This is similar to the practices of some of the most prominent members of the New York School of painting.

As former co-editors of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* as well as practicing artists, we have been committed to engaging in such a dual practice ourselves: we have often invited artists to write about issues and art of concern and relevance to their work. "Ripple Effects" is in a way a ripple effect of that involvement. We have invited some of the artists who first wrote for *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* to participate in this issue of *New Observations* as well as several other artists whose art practice involves language and writing as either subject or image of their artwork or as a parallel practice, or significant source of inspiration. We have encouraged them to extend the basic premise of the discussion in any direction of particular present relevance to their work.

In the past, dictates of modernism—"Greenbergian" modernism, at least—have distanced painting from language. Even though the appearance of language through the use of collage was an important turning point in the development of modernist painting, as Brian O'Doherty observed in *Inside the White Cube*, "Without going into the attractive complexities of the letter and the word in modernism, they are disruptive." Certainly much avant-garde art, other than painting, has benefitted from that "disruption," and for a while painting seemed to lose ground to these openly linguistic forms. However, in recent years we have seen the infusion of popular culture and multiple sources into the once sacred realm of the fine arts.

The artists who are included in this issue have a variety of approaches to the subject of art and language.

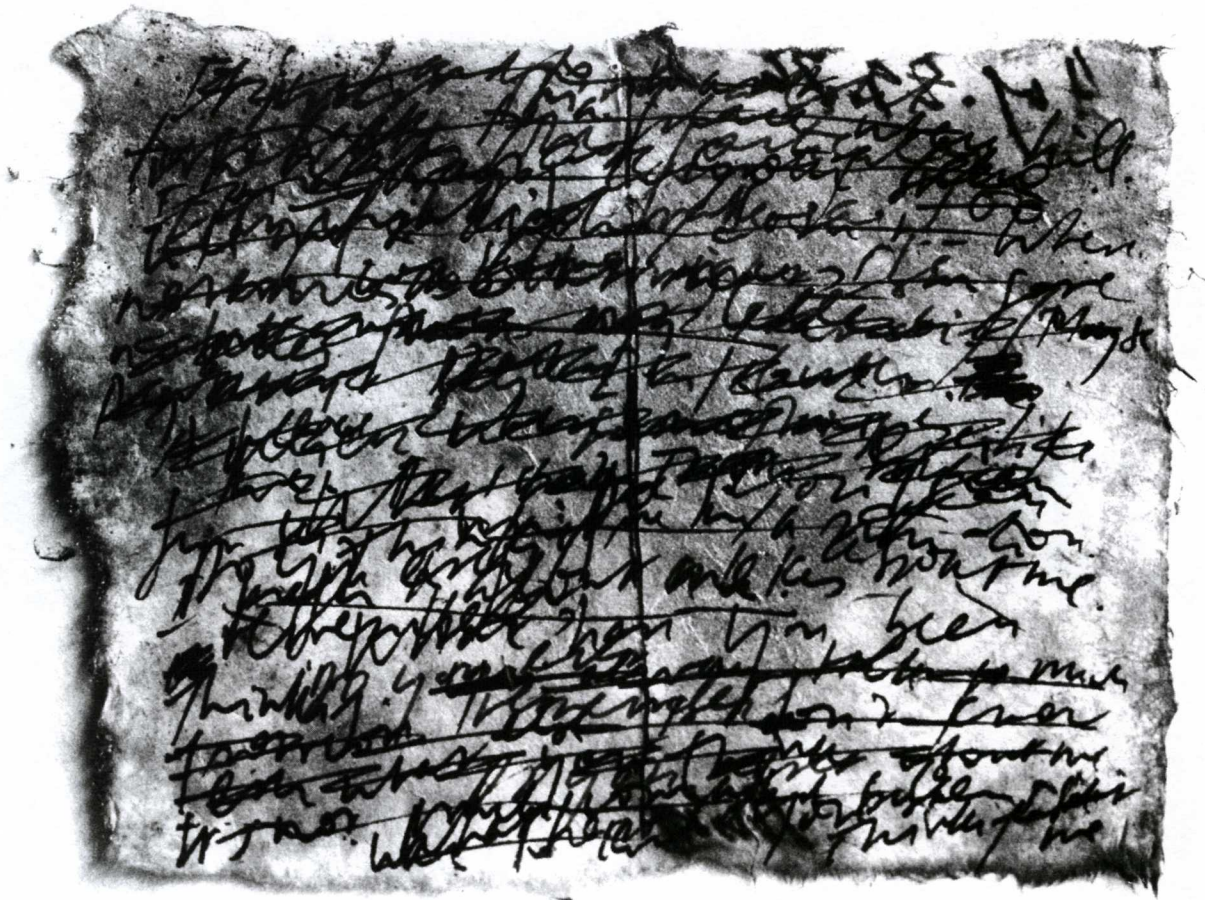
Some of these artists represent language directly in their work: Julia Jacquette writes of her first experience of viewing paintings which represented writing and how that influenced her subsequent work. Kay Rosen emphasizes the way typography and language structure interpretation and discusses her desire to exercise the science of linguistics in what for her is the more suitable field of visual art. Amy Sillman distinguishes the importance of language as speech and her paintings as figures of speech; Christian Schumann describes his sources, from comics to concrete poetry; Mira Schor notes her initial political goals in depicting language as a sign for female thought and her concerns for imbricating writing language and painting language. Kenneth Goldsmith tells how the purchase of a used copy of Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book* inspired his subsequent artworks. Rochelle Feinstein discusses her use of words in painting and the grammar of painting. Jane Hammond explores painting itself, including the construction of painting as a language. Tom Knechtel and David Reed note the formative, constitutive importance of film, literature, and opera to their work. Faith Wilding writes of her interdisciplinary practice, where traditional painting language is but one of many languages used to communicate political and theoretical concerns. David Humphrey zeroes in on the relation of the concept of beauty to his paintings. Susan Bee writes about her relationship to writing and editing and about her collaborations with writers and how it has influenced her artwork. Lucio Pozzi discusses the distinction between art and words and the development of his Word Works. Pamela Wye narrates a parable about writing and art, while Richard Tuttle contributes a manifesto-like list of sentences and a poem.

Together, we think that these artists give some idea of the breadth and depth of the contemporary artist's preoccupation and possible obsession with language and how it changed and influenced their visual work.

Susan Bee is an artist living in NYC. From 1986-1996 she was co-editor of M/E/A/N/I/N/G. Her artist's book, Little Orphan Anagram, with poems by Charles Bernstein will be forthcoming in 1997 from Granary Books.

Mira Schor is a painter and writer living in New York City. A collection of her essays on art, Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture, will be published by Duke University Press in early 1997. She is on the faculty of Parsons School of Design.

MIRA SCHOR



MIRA SCHOR *Postcard - August 29, 1976, 1976*. Ink and mixed media on rice paper, 5 x 6 1/4 inches.
Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Mira Schor

WRITING AS A VISUAL IMAGE was first an important subject of my artwork during the seventies. I was committed to infusing art with autobiographical content as a political act, to bring female experience into art. My first method of constructing a visual autobiography had been self-portraiture in a narrative context. A couple of years later my figured image left the picture, in favor of my handwriting on layers of page- or dress-shaped translucent rice paper. I began to use writing as an image at the point when I realized that my handwriting was no longer the site for adolescent rehearsals of different identities but had finally stabilized into a system of elegantly undecipherable marks that seemed a more flexible, more metaphorical surrogate for myself.

In all my usages of writing as image, my hope is that the writing is visually interesting as graphic mark and as it occurs within

the materiality of the work. This should be totally connected to what the words may say—the language of dreams, diary, and quotidian inner thought, of political rhetoric, or color—and also completely independent from the verbal meaning if not from the *idea* of language as sign and emblem of thought, so that the work can give pleasure, and, I hope, convey its meaning through visual cues alone, not linguistic ones. This was in fact the nature of my earliest experience with letters as images in art: many of the works of Judaica made by my artist parents included engraved and incised Hebrew letters that I could *only* appreciate as images because I don't read Hebrew.

I do also write critical prose about art, and in order to do so, I read, and certainly the look of a certain kind of theory text has at times become a still-life element for my painting: all those parentheses and virgules that reveal the phallic undercurrents

of language. Recently I've also somewhat ruefully been brought to consider some similarities in the way one uses painting and verbal languages: in each case one can get carried away. Excess in painting is valued by many as "painterliness," decried by others as narcissistic virtuosity, or worse. In critical, non-fiction writing, you can only hope that the places where you grabbed hold of some words and galloped away with them will be called "poetic" and will have taken your reader someplace that approximates what you wanted to say in the first place. But "poetic" can also mean lacking intellectual rigor. Paint marks that are not self-aware but just there to show off, words that are in love with themselves, these are ever present parallel dangers inherent to a dual practice.

Like many artists who write, I am skittish about prejudices against intellectual artists and bilingual people in general. I feel compelled to assure others that my painting comes first and matters more to me. In fact these are separate disciplines I

am interested in. Each answers specific needs, has specific purposes and audiences, and each must answer to the rules of their discipline. They are not exchangeable, although the concerns of my painting color the direction of my writing, and the textual research for my writing often enriches my painting.

In current paintings I combine the abstract scrawls of my handwriting with the careful script in which I was taught to write. I had cathected to the physical and aesthetic pleasure of writing out a letter as I was instructed to do, putting my weight into a thicker downstroke, lifting my wrist for a delicate upstroke. In the beginning, there was the beauty of the letter *a*. Now there is the *Joy* of embedding the gap between visual and verbal languages within each other's materiality. Language is almost a vestigial subject, just a place to hang my engagement with paint, yet the more I am interested in painting paint, the more language as image seems an essential conceptual anchor.



MIRA SCHOR *Joy*, (detail of *War Frieze XVI - Men Are the Essence of Joy*), 1994. Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Ken Pelka.