

# Disappearing, Inc.

by Tom McGlynn

## THE TIMES

THE FLAG ART FOUNDATION | JUNE 1 – AUGUST 11, 2017

*The Times* is a cleverly capacious title for this large group exhibition, referring simultaneously to a multiplicity of historical periodizations and to a colloquial condensation of the *New York Times*. The works, like the title, encompass the specificity of individual perspectives, as well as the generalized verbal semantics and visual syntax of the printed commons.

The FLAG Art Foundation’s team of curators, including Stephanie Roach, Risa Daniels, and Jon Rider, has fully scoped a kind of “map of misreading”<sup>1</sup> of the paper of record by assembling a rollicking group of artists whose shared interest is the slippage between “All The News That’s Fit to Print” and what readers might actually infer between those storied lines. Each participant in this invitational riffs on the imagery, text, layout, or even the phenomenal density of the newspaper, in what amounts to an ad hoc glossary of emancipated spectatorship. Almost all of the artists do as Jasper Johns prompts: “Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it.” Yet each arrives at a different conclusion, a different way of reading “the times.” In this era of fake news and compulsory event cycles, the individualized, haptic interpretation of a given text or series of connected images can become quite a radical gesture in itself. This group of artists and poets show a phenomenal capability for a more drastic and radical misinterpretation of current events than typical editorial critique would ever allow. One doesn’t necessarily need to take “the times” simply at its word, in other words. And further, by creating one’s own delinquent text-picture from the onslaught of words and images within our post-contemporary reality, one might, paradoxically, realize a firmer ground (or at least a more personal, meaningful experience) for interpreting the truth. Such a radicalized Babel might be just what the here-represented Maynard Monrow could be suggesting in his *Untitled/Babel* (2015), which states, in plastic movable type on black velour, “Never underestimate the power of Babel.”



*The Times*, installation photo (Photo Credit: Steven Probert; Courtesy Flag Art Foundation).

The show opens with a startling combo of Ellsworth Kelly's memorial *Ground Zero* (2003) and Rirkrit Tiravanija's gridded layout of the *New York Times*'s January 21, 2017 coverage of Donald Trump's inauguration. Kelly inserts a simple green trapezoid into the publication's printed image of the former World Trade Center site, while Tiravanija overpaints the newspaper with block lettering declaring, "Tomorrow Is The Question." It is a canny opening gambit on the part of the show's organizers: by intentionally declining to coalesce a pre-determined, polemical reading of the social and political meaning of the assembled work, they allow the artists' varied gestures to ping freely and suggestively against each other's rhetorical forms—in this instance, by placing Kelly's mutely assertive shape opposite Tiravanija's noisier semantics. Hence, the show is taut with content without being didactic or leading; a spirit of para-journalism infuses the ensemble.

In some works, certain otherwise-opaque details about the newspaper's typical layout and editorial habits winnow transparently to the surface. A prime example of this can be seen in Richard Prince's blood-red painting *Untitled (Tiffany)* (2006), in which an ad for the glamorous jeweler Tiffany & Co. (which apparently always appears on the third page of the Times) competes with dreadful headline follow-ups from the front page. Lorraine O'Grady's playful dispersals of cut-up poetry, made during a period of the artist's convalescence, is sardonically entitled, *Cutting Out the New York Times, You Can Succeed in Your Own Business* (1977/2010). Both artists let the editorial content of the newspaper speak as evidence of itself, while nonetheless undermining its authority to sway the reader's opinion toward any determined point. Their use of the paper against its own best editorial intentions sets up a cognitive dissonance, a schizophrenic ramble that permeates the entire installation. One tends to drift aimlessly, to snag here or there on such burbling disturbances only to be sent again spinning into the flood of text and images that swirl through and around the *Times*.

With a note of nostalgia, one sees in the exhibition references to sections that no longer exist in the newspaper, such as the classified ads that have fallen victim to contemporary digital platforms. Adam Simon engages this erstwhile feature in his ironically titled collage painting, *Optimist* (1992), by creating manic chains of circled want ads, interlocking as if the sky was the limit for the circler's ambition. Other works in the show also create associative matrices from the layout's syntax, including *Next Day Page A1* (2015–16), Doug Ashford's empathic veils of alternating transparent and opaque ink superimposed on images of the burning World Trade Center, and the simply titled *July 1996* (1996), Nancy Chunn's inspired inscriptions of Fra Angelico-like angels onto a grid of the newspaper. Sean Landers makes up his own dark strip of cut-out comics from the *Times* in *New York Times Cartoons* (1994). What unifies each of these approaches to form and content is the inherent grid of the broadsheet, and how its readymade formal and social structuring offers prime real estate for aesthetic squatters.

In addition to some of the show's participants' use of now-defunct editorial features, more than a few artists refer, either directly or indirectly, to the eventual disappearance of the newspaper altogether. One prime example of this tack is Lauren Seiden's carbonized, minimalist tower of unreadable papers in *The Future is Lost in Yesterday's News* (2016). Another is Agnieszka Kurant's remarkable *Future Anterior* (2008), in which she produces a facsimile of the *Times* in a series of futuristic, commissioned articles printed in disappearing ink. The ephemerality of the newspaper as an older medium, doomed to an uncertain future of fondness and neglect, is also poignantly addressed in the design collective PLAYLAB, INC.'s *Stationary*

*Paperboy* (2017). In this work, a clutch of folded newspapers hangs forlornly in a canvas bag from an exercise bike, an object soliloquy of the arresting of hand-delivered media.

A few of the artists address topical politics more directly, such as AIDS activist and performance artist Hunter Reynolds in his HIV-positive blood-spattered and sutured newspaper grid, *Why We March* (2011) and Mark Zawatski in his digital print, *Mother Arrested For Blocking Louisiana Highway At Protest After Police Shooting, July 2016* (2016). Other works take a more painterly, perhaps laconic approach to subjects “ripped from the headlines,” such as Joy Garnett’s *Explosion, Yellow & White* (2009) and Stephen Lack’s paintings with similarly self-explanatory titles, *Business Men Descending* (2014) and *High School Lockdown* (2015). In a few instances, any reference to the actual newspaper seems quite tenuously adhered to the given form of the *Times*, devolving into obsessive gestural transcription, as in the bleeding colors of intersecting vertical and horizontal script in Dashiell Manley’s *The New York Times, Thursday October 14, 2012, national edition Southern California (front page)* (2017) or Anthony Campuzano’s blocky, black-on-yellow lettered columns of obituaries in *Endless Column (Various New York Times, Various Titles)* (2017). Rather than use the *Times* Roman type as found material, these two artists translate the paper’s content into unique matrices, creating their own typographic gestalt. Perhaps the furthest reaches of relative association with the publication is represented by the brothers William and Steven Ladd’s grid of coiled fibers crafted in communion with prisoners in New York City’s Riker’s Island. Each coil represents an individual prisoner’s time marked in incarceration, giving sweetly-crafted yet somber form to time accrued “in a box,” a prison term for solitary confinement.

*The Times* represents the kind of generous curatorial influence sorely needed in such insistently divisive times as ours. The show is a perfect example of how ambitions toward an inclusive, wide-angled view on a specific form and content can actually yield a concordance of difference: a thousand platforms of unmediated being. If the *New York Times* eventually does bite the dust, then perhaps the attendant cloud will raise a million viral defections.

## Notes

In *Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Harold Bloom enjoins that a strong misreading of poets by other poets is essential to recharging the richness of the artistic, and by extension, larger social gene-pool.

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## CONTRIBUTOR

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TOM MCGLYNN is an artist, writer, and independent curator based in the N.Y.C. area. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Cooper- Hewitt National Design Museum of the Smithsonian. He is the director of Beautiful Fields, an organization dedicated to socially-engaged curatorial projects, and is also currently a visiting lecturer at Parsons/the New School.