



*Out of Order*, 1991. Sign paint on canvas.

CRITICAL *Reflection*

Kay Rosen  
Laura Carpenter Gallery

*Imagine Gertrude Stein on a road trip,* flying along the interstate. All the elements of a

landscape are there, more or less, unrolling like a movie along the windows: trees, fields, mountains, etc. But that's not what you get. Instead, Gertrude sees a world of signs, a landscape in Futura typeface. It goes like this: STOP STOP, McDONALDS, GAS, GAS FOOD LODGING, EXIT 109. This is what makes Kay Rosen's show so beautiful—her realization that Gertrude would be right—that the Futura world is everywhere, and a real landscape painter should paint exactly that. A DIP AHEAD is a DIP AHEAD is a DIP AHEAD. And on and on. Until the point when it isn't any more, which is where both Gertrude and Kay start, but in different ways.

It's in this typeface landscape we realize what Deleuze and Guattari meant when they wrote that we need to "define an abominable faculty" for "emitting, receiving, and transmitting order-words." Because it's here more than anyplace that we realize the "elementary unit of language—the statement—is the order-word... language is not meant to be believed but to be obeyed." Much of the fashionable feminist language art in the '80s took this dictum to heart and tried to monkeywrench the system of signs with "subversive" order-words which couldn't be obeyed, or which tried to expose the wretchedness of authority by using the voice of authority.

Sadly though, while taking their methods from the Situationist International, most of these ultraserious, wannabe subversives neglected the Situationists' crucial, gorgeously crackpot gesture. Which was to kick out all the artists and then self-destruct. So now Barbara Kreuger "I SHOP, THEREFORE I AM" T-shirts are worn without a trace of irony, and Jenny Holzer's sarcophagi seem to contain nothing so much as the febrile remains of a particular moment in art. The commodity culture has always melted down monkeywrenches along with everything else. Kay Rosen, though, manages to dodge the bullet by recognizing all this, and then taking Rhonda Lieberman's dictum to heart: "The most powerful thing language can do now, as ever, is to be stupid."

*Click* is a particularly lovely example of this. It's red sign enamel on canvas with black Futura lettering. The letters are all there, they spell "click," but the initial "c" has been slid over to the right so that it forms a "d." With one careful misstep, Rosen manages to telescope about twenty years of a particular branch of feminist discourse into five letters. You hear the click of a gun being cocked, the click of a camera's shutter, and they're both dicks, both extensions of the male libido, the male gaze. Feminist discourse and male libido alike are deflated: the one because it's so funny and so stupid; the other because it's true. Click is dick.

My favorite piece, though, is *Out of Order*. It's three panels done in silver sign paint, with "o.o.o." painted in black. *Out of Order* manages to evoke the pathos of every cheesy love song you've ever heard, while at the same time summoning up all the frustration and quiet despair in the face of unthinkable bureaucracy you find in almost everything Kafka wrote. "Out of order" is not just the sign of busted machinery, but also of the broken heart and the pathetic victim, as well. The telephone says "out of order," and the lover cries "oh, oh, oh," because the beloved is gone for good. The computers at the IRS are out of order, and some poor loser cries out because now he's doomed, lost, trying to find the lord of the castle forever. "Out of order" is the cry of the loser everywhere, trapped by some incomprehensible mechanism. It's incredibly poignant and beautifully stupid at the same time.

Which is the point. By taking seriously those moments of misperception where what we thought we read is always richer and more true than what's actually there, Rosen's work finds real strength and a possibility for freedom. By letting language be stupid, she exposes the weak points in order-words, in the system of signs. The system of objects may be a castle, her work tells us, but it's in a permanent California, ready to burn up, or slide down the hill, or just fall into the ocean at any moment. In the world of the Futura, getting it wrong is the best defense.



*Click* 1992 Enamel sign paint on canvas