

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

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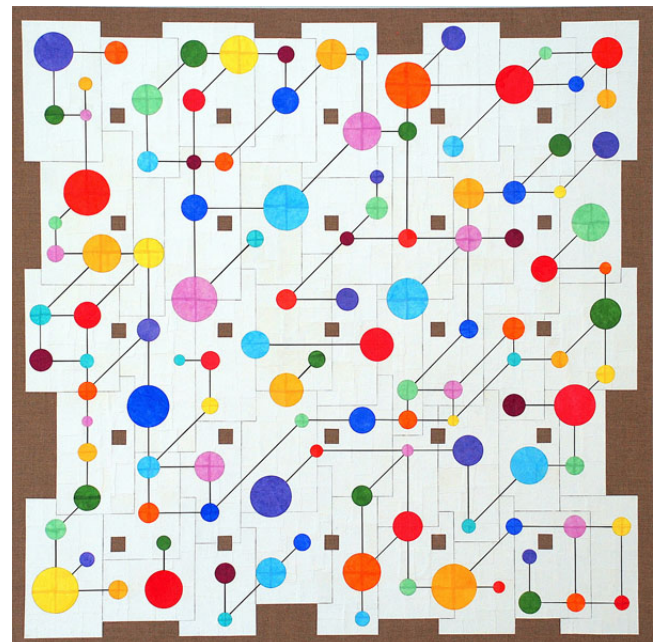
## Talk/Show: Language and the Resistant Artwork

*by Richard Kalina*

In pondering the condition of art and the flood of associated language made possible by global digital connectivity, a proposition has been floated—one that allows for two aligned readings and two answers to the questions it raises. The first: is there too much talk and writing about art? Has the worldwide communications network unleashed a torrent of language (akin to the image glut of the '80s) that crowds out art and renders the visual less visible? The second reading (and the more subtle): is there too much language embedded in and hovering around the work of art itself? To answer the first: no—generally speaking, the more talk, and thus the more interest in art, the better. And besides, what can anyone do about it? The world of the Abstract Expressionists was awash with talk: it didn't seem to hurt the art at all.

As for the second—language within the work of art—this is more complicated and will depend in part on how broadly you define language. My feeling is that language will continue to function as a pendant to hybrid and conceptually-driven art for the foreseeable future. If history is any guide, that language element will fall somewhere along the continuum of justification, commentary, explanation, exegesis, footnotes, quotations, sets of instructions, captions, descriptions, ruminations, and narratives of all sorts; and it will bear either a direct or tangential connection to the more purely visual material it complements.

It is important, though, to distinguish between language



Richard Kalina, "Nominal Space," 2012. 42"x42", collage,

enmeshed, however loosely, in the work of art itself, and acrylic, flashe on linen.  
language applied in relation to the work after its creation.

To include after-the-fact language (by the artist or by others) as part of the perceptual armature of the work itself—which is what the proposition to all intents and purposes asks us to consider—is to head in a direction that can only diminish the effectiveness and intrinsic coherence of that work. Critical as well as casual discussion of specific artworks is a longstanding, justifiable, unstoppable, and inevitable practice. What is not inevitable is the incorporation of language into all forms of art, either directly as a structural or formal element or indirectly as a compulsory openness to explication by non-visual means.

Text (in the larger sense of the word) aligns itself naturally with hybrid art forms. It is resisted by more media-specific art—particularly painting and sculpture. If we uncouple postproduction language from the artwork itself, then we can see that an insistence on the inherent necessity of that language has an agenda, which is that non-language-based art is essentially irrelevant; at best a function of the marketplace or a recurring nostalgic tic. Contemporary art that doesn't speak or write, that doesn't clearly announce its intentions is, according to this way of thinking, mute or willfully solipsistic.

This agenda is encapsulated within a larger and highly dubious notion: the idea that a work of art should be compliant and comprehensible, that it should serve a purpose, that it bears a necessary morphological resemblance to other forms of communication. To operate under this assumption is to diminish the *resistance* of the artwork. I am not speaking of aura, but rather of that quality of mutability and scalelessness that allows something relatively small and localized to assume significance and a free-floating independent existence and yet to continue to be an irreducible thing-in-itself.

The idea that art is inherently discourse and thus by its nature attracts discourse is an attractive one, but it is a simplistic formulation and in many ways untrue. Art communicates but it is not necessarily part of the communications network. We live in an instantaneous age, a time, not unlike the 19th century, when the multitudinous physical world seemed comprehensible and manageable by virtue of its infinite ability to be broken down and categorized. Now everything feels connectable, discussable, knowable, immediately available—and as before, comprehensible and manageable. If art is just a subset of language, then it too is subject to the cutting and pasting, the up and downloading, the dematerialization, the conventionalizing, and that inexorable movement toward speed, intelligibility, and commonality that characterizes language in its demotic forms.

The desire to cocoon art in a nimbus of serious-minded affability, functionality, and explication—to talk to it and have it talk back to us—masks a more sinister goal: to make art just like everything else in the postmodern world; to have it behave, or to encourage it to misbehave in entirely predictable ways. To see the artwork as a partner in an ongoing discussion springs from a desire to master it, to render it anodyne. Surrounded by language though it might be, the work of art fortunately remains a mysterious and resistant still point in a changing sea of perception and interpretation.

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**RECOMMENDED ARTICLES**

Prolixity and Painting

*by Nancy Princenthal*  
*Another Language*

*by Adam Bell*  
TAUBA AUERBACH, "How to Spell the Alphabet" *Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language*

*by Diana Seo Hyung Lee*

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