

ART + TEXT

TERRIBLE BEAUTY WILD WOMEN

KAY ROSEN JOYCE HINTERDING

Recent PAINTING by A Jewish **WOMAN** IN Indiana

You know the Pope loves to do crossword puzzles. He's sitting there doing one and asks a Cardinal nearby, "What's a four letter word for woman ending in '-u-n-t?'" Triumphantly, the Cardinal says "Aunt!" The Pope says, "Oh, right! Do you have an eraser?"

As told by Carl Leibowitz

The first Kay Rosen piece I ever saw was *The Man* list, which is hysterical. The piece has a drag affect to it, implying a kind of linguistic transsexualism, a "drag" through language from a king wannabe to a B.B. King wannabe to a big queen who wanted to be "Aunt Bea," the rotund traditional figure from *Mayberry R.F.D.*, to someone, perhaps through consciousness-raising sessions, who "would be" the great women's libber of seventies TV, Bea Arthur, star of the hit show *Maude*, who had a fabulous deep voice, wore long vests, tunics and slacks, advocated abortion rights, and probably inspired many housewives to take assertiveness training courses. As I watched the show with my babysitter, I thrilled to see a woman "talking back" to her husband on network TV, and I credit Norman Lear, the producer of the show, with rocking my political world, then ripening in the suburbs, where I would graze for positive female role models on *Sonny & Cher*, *Here Come the Brides*, and *Laugh-In*. In 1991, the Bea Arthur reference really wowed me, since references to hit seventies TV shows were not as prevalent in the art context, let alone in mall fashion, as they are today. We imagine "the Man" dressed up in a classic *Maude* ensemble, garnished with salt-and-pepper wig, ruling the roost and her husband, Arthur. The Kay Rosen piece is about "the Man" and his ambitions; yet the structure of the list inexorably turns him into a temporary transsexual, as if the ultimate evolution of "the Man" passes through a becoming-woman. Bea Arthur becomes "King Arthur," or "King Art"; the "Art King" is a drag queen.

While it is true, in any case, that it is important to get

The Man Who Would
Be King
The Man Who Would
Be B.B. King
The Man Who Would
Be Queen Bee
The Man Who Would
Be Aunt Bea
The Man Who Would
Be Bea Arthur
The Man Who Would
Be King Arthur
The Man Who Would
Be Art King

The Man, 1991, etching, edition of 32, 25.5 x 19.5 inches.
Courtesy Feature, New York.

along with a lot of queens if you want to be Art King, you can also read *The Man* as a perfect illustration of the Deleuze-Guattari concept of "becoming": a lifestyle plan developed by Spinoza and Nietzsche in which any body, even the Man, emerges as a multiplicity of affects, intensities, and relations with the potential to enter into composition with relations compatible, or incompatible, to them: becoming-invisible, becoming-animal, becoming-intense. The body is not a Whole, but a multiplicity of relations. "Good" relations increase one's power, leading to greater perfection, merging you with larger, more agreeable totalities; "bad" ones tend to decompose you, to divide you into subsets ("Consciousness is the passage, or rather the awareness of the passage from these less potent totalities to more potent ones, and vice versa").¹ The whole thing finally

boils down to mood, or affect: good relations activate and intensify bodies; bad ones sadden, decompose, slow down.

Deleuze functions as the RuPaul of thought; the affirmative Philosophy King towers over postwar thought the way the 7-foot-tall drag queen towers over American talk shows preaching action and increased existence through affect and expert styling. When asked her height, RuPaul replies, repeatedly, with undiminished enthusiasm: "With high heels and attitude, baby. I'm through the roof!" Through Deleuze-Guattari's affirmative action plan, any body is free, for example, to "become-woman"—women included. Deleuze (Guattari died last year) would love the way the word "Be" emerges in *The Man* as a state, in effect, of "becoming": we see "the Man" actively "becoming"—open to various relations—rather than "being" stuck (in an identity).

At the same time, the Kay Rosen piece seems to say (little narrative of freedom that I read into the piece, about the Man becoming a queen, then becoming Art King), this "meaning" is all an arbitrary effect of language, of the list system (set up by "the man who would be ..." series), so any attempt to pin down the "meaning" or message of the piece is somewhat crazy.

You are "becoming" when you go from meaning effect to intensity. And stuttering is that shift. Deleuze loved things that stuttered because they are becoming-intense; when the words come apart, they become particles and force. Kay Rosen captures the force of words, when they are coming apart from their meaning. On canvas they become intense elementary particles; they release affect, suspending it in shiny smooth enamel sign paint, rescuing it from meaning, from "being" trapped.

In an unusual video format, we get a Kay Rosen version of suspense: while a solemn drum beat plods on, the word "Sisyphus" dissolves in and out of the crisp blue screen, misspelt about 67 times. The misspellings allude to this mythic figure of frustration but can only seem to blurt out noises suggesting lab specimens or fungi: the whole grueling exercise finally resolves itself into a real word, but not

swallows swords, 1990, enamel sign paint on canvas, 13.6 x 25 inches.
Courtesy Feature, New York.



Edgar Degas, 1987, sign paint on canvas, 2 panels each 10 x 10 x 2.75 inches.
Courtesy Feature, New York.

"Sisyphus"; it ends limping out, in a "Sissyfuss." The list also appears on a long blue ribbon multiple, like a loser spelling award for people who think of the *most* possible spellings rather than the "right" one.

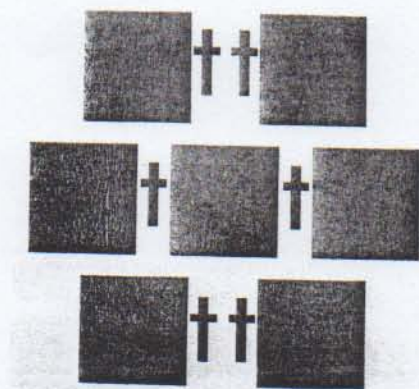
"Beware of all picturesque men!"

Friedrich N.

Shalom, y'all!

I first knew of Kay Rosen through *The Man* so I imagined what the Artist would be like. This was in 1991 in New York City, so I imagined that she would be some kind of scary Kathy Acker clone, working the generic bad-girl look with a pierced nose, dyed black hair and a tattoo (it was the summer of the Tattoo). I assumed that she would be some kind of 23-year-old art prodigy. I prepared to hate her.

I finally had a chance to meet the Artist when I moved out to Chicago. Insecure in my aesthetic immune system, I was terrified I would enter into combination with inadequate style ideas and would mutate, without noticing it, into a candidate for Jenny Craig, wearing blue eye-shadow without irony, and a T-shirt that said "Cats." A mutual friend from NYC told me to call Kay Rosen. I thought, no, I'm afraid of this woman—she's gonna bite my head off. She'll think I'm

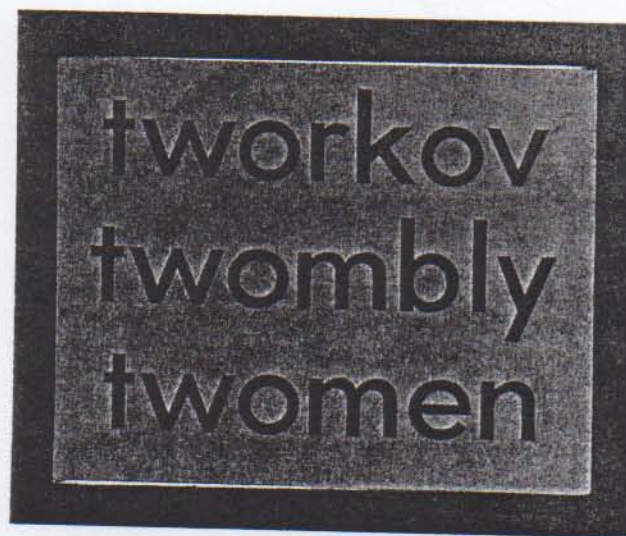


Little statuette, 1990, enamel sign paint on canvas, 20 x 21 inches. Courtesy Feature, New York.

a nerd. My worries quickly dissolved into a major life lesson: I have learned from Kay Rosen, I have been instructed by her. She is like this petite Jewish Mom with a Texan accent who is happily married, lives in Gary, Indiana, and frequently ends her conversations with "all right, lovey!". It's true. The basic Kay look includes trim brunette bob, wire-rimmed glasses, dark blazer, dark slacks. The more sporty version includes blazer and jeans, for city; long gray sweater and jeans, for school. She has a nice nose.

You always want to know what kind of person the artist is, how they found their voice and what nourishes it. While observing that the Artist is a sleaze bitch or snob, has bad skin, or a big butt, shouldn't affect your reception of the work, you still want to know what's going on—out of intellectual curiosity. Kay Rosen is among the few genuinely talented people I have been privileged to know who are totally non-backstabbing. (Five—I think.) In contrast to many driven people, Kay Rosen is genuinely happy to hear other people's good news, and actually facilitates their development. A kind of genius who keeps on coming up with these verbal found objects as if by kismet, she is living proof that you don't have to be an asshole to have a decent career—but sometimes it helps!

Gary, Indiana, birthplace of Michael Jackson and home of Kay Rosen is not, in fact, a "suburb"—which I thought it was—but as Kay Rosen corrected me, it is an ethnically diverse sort of bombed-out town that used to be a beachfront vacation community, within commuting distance of Chicago. It read to me, however, as 'burb, because it reminded me of where I grew up, where the houses had big lawns, were near a major city, and no one walked anywhere. I thought of Art as the winged vehicle of cultural salvation that would lift and separate me from the TV, malls, assimilated Jewry and obsession with fashion magazines from whence I came. My asleep sensibility told me that Art was elsewhere, my actual life didn't count and was in fact a hellish digression obstructing Reality, which resided in Books, Media Outlets,



Six, 1988, enamel sign paint on canvas, 14.3 x 17.5 inches. Courtesy Feature, New York.

and Museums—particularly in France; someday, if I did the right thing, these sites of increased existence would interface with my personal circumstances. Years later, Kay Rosen emerged for me as this uncanny figure, this Jewish/Mom/Indiana version of Immanuel Kant, who was totally out there in the suburbs discovering the limits of intelligibility on a daily basis, but whose habits were so outwardly normal that his neighbours set their watches by the regularity of his afternoon walks.

Everyone takes total delight in visiting Kay Rosen's house, a tidy lowslung ranch-style: the driveway goes up to big double doors staring boldly out of its front like black rectangles blotting out letters in a Kay Rosen painting. Highlights include the kitchen and the studio. The first is a gorgeous kind of neo-Mediterranean unreconstructed 1970s kitchen in an avocado color scheme which appreciators of vernacular "suburban" design would kill for. Several admirers of Kay and the kitchen have expressed shock that she apologizes for the fact that it has never been redone. Seeing a lot of Dole banana stickers on the fridge, the international series with labels from every country, made me wonder if these were not everyday occult influences on her work. The studio generating the work which looks cool and desirable in the most pristine blue-chip gallery and museum settings, is a basement with dark wood paneling where you would expect to find a rec room or ping-pong table, rather than the creative milieu where this ex-comparative linguistics student plays with insanely specific details of words, obsesses over letter placement, foregrounds the opacity of language, and keeps a journal filled with mysterious entries like "b-ing," "boing"—the kernels for

future treasures. I like to imagine 21st-century art historians poring over this source, to discover the "inner voice" of the artist as a kind of dyslexic Minnie Mouse. It is here that she discovers Kay Rosenisms such as "Yo Yo Ma/Yo Ma Ma," and "Edga/Dega," who must be a strangely neglected French Impressionist from the Bronx, or that together "Tworkov" and "Twombly" make "Twomen." Or that the series "Tom Can Cha/Tom Can Cha" as a diptych, makes all kinds of dance music at once—i.e., Tom-Tom, Can-Can, Cha Cha.

We all come up with these expectations that an artist has to be a certain way. Pilgrimages to Kay's house bring these expectations to the surface, and show us how deep in our mental lobes lodge shallow expectations that the artist's life looks like the *mise-en-scène* for an upscale beer ad, experimental film, or *Vogue* shoot. As Budd Rosen remarked, "It takes a lot of guts to show people that basement." And indeed, Kay Rosen fortifies herself by recalling photos of Francis Bacon's studio filled with garbage and rubbish: "I think of him a lot—that he had a studio like that." She was particularly delighted to hear that when he once got a big fancy studio in London he said he was totally castrated there, and couldn't work until he moved into a place he could freely mess up. An impending visit by a curator provoked a fresh discussion of the basement; we discussed whether or not she should "apologize," whether or not she "should be" embarrassed. We reasoned it was much better not to apologize. Seeming not to care, even if it *were* embarrassing (which it certainly is not!), would make a far better impression. The studio in fact functions as a total revelation; it's amazing how we often protect people from

what we can really teach them because we are "embarrassed" to show things as they are.

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Kay Rosen took up painting late enough in life to wonder how people knew enough of her interest in art to make her a gift of watercolors when she was in college. However, she also remarked that her mother always thought she drew beautifully, and sent her to art lessons when she was growing up in Texas, where they did "You know, the usual things, copied things from postcards." In college and graduate school Kay Rosen studied comparative linguistics, where they would do things like diagram sentences and break down words phonetically and it is easy to see how this attention to the nuts and bolts of language, to the word as a thing with a multiplicity of parts, rather than a transparent carrier of "meaning," could lead later to keen explorations of the way language doesn't speak, or rather stalls, the way the "meaning" gets psychotically overwhelmed by the sheer materiality of the words—elementary particles with their own molecular stuff going on, with the potential to be free, intense, and seductively uncooperative.

One of the reasons her work resonates with so many of the younger artists today is because it is a kind of one-liner—with a delayed reaction. Often, you don't fully get the piece until you know the title.

When put on the spot to name early influences, Kay Rosen cited Abstract Expressionists, "for using paint in that way," and somewhat apologetically, Larry Rivers for including text in the painting ("although he's not that great now"), Rauschenberg's found objects, and Conceptual-Minimalists from the 1970s like Barry Le Va, who made art out of systems and patterns in language that seem random and chaotic. She cited the elegant look of Laurence Wiener's work with admiration. Perhaps the most illuminating occult

Partners, 1991, enamel sign paint on canvas, 2 panels each 16 x 10 inches. Courtesy Feature, New York.



Same, 1991, black and silver sign paint on canvas, 7.5 x 23 inches. Courtesy Feature, New York.

key to the world of Kay Rosen is the Minimalist composer Steve Reich, who showed systems coming apart and going back together in real time, and used found phrases in music, particularly in a piece called "Soon It's Gonna Rain," based on a phrase from a black preacher.

Early Kay Rosen pieces used almost cartoony-looking, extremely schematic images with words, usually producing some kind of pun. For example, a diptych with a king's head on each side, one labeled Xerxes I, the other Xerxes II, is entitled *Xeroxes*—presenting powerful rulers as replicants, and vice versa. Later, she dropped the images to concentrate on her wealth of discoveries, sometimes amazingly minimal, about the actual words themselves, as in *Stunts*, which literally can stand on its head. "Même," means *Same*: including two circumflexes to make the two halves of the word *really* the same cancels it out, turns it into nonsense. In the "Ed" series, Ed functions as both a character and a suffix. *Oh, Eau* is a larger piece in which doubled chunks of prose create narratives that radically change in meaning when the same letters undergo different spacing and punctuation.

Click literally "clicks"—between male member, i.e. "dick," to the "click" of castration itself, which separates the tip of the "d-" from its stem. Here a simple slip of the letter dismembers the word. We are reminded how language seems to connect us to the world, by disconnecting it: through words the world is split from itself. Through this very negativity—this passage through dismemberment—in

the Kay Rosen paintings we understand the word and its strange vicissitudes as a body. The paintings are portraits of words as bodies, and portraits of bodies as words. By capturing this "click," by turning it into a solid thing, Kay Rosen's paintings "tarry with the negative";² we appreciate the way language has to mutilate the world—dismember it—in order for us to get it, in order for us to "get" its spirit, its charm. Through human mediation, the aesthetic truth of the world always emerges through some kind of wreck. Cary Leibowitz, *aka* Candy Ass, and Queen of Comedy, applauded *noink pigmentless* as the "world's first kosher painting."

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Early this century, Proust wrote *Against Sainte-Beuve* as a polemic permanently giving the lie to the assessment of the Work based on what kind of person the artist was, and where they hung out. He railed against Sainte-Beuve, an institutionally powerful critic of the late nineteenth century, who assessed the work based on the artist's character, milieu, and comportment in society. While Sainte-Beuve was a priggish social climber, his "method" was a precursor to the current "progressive" trend which confuses aesthetics with sociology and reads the artist as spokesmodel for subject-groups and "identities" based on ethnicity, race, gender, or class. Proust argued that the artist cannot be extrapolated from the work since the "person" in the work is precisely the person you leave behind when you go out into relations with others, into society. The narrator of Proust's search was chagrined that he was never as inspired in company as he was at home—or as "himself."

It's really stupid to reduce the "truth" of the artist to their

Stunts, 1991, silver and black sign paint on canvas, 7.5 x 20 inches. Courtesy Feature, New York.

Installation view including *Click*, Laura Carpenter Fine Art, Santa Fe, 1992.





noink



pigmentless

noink pigmentless, 1990, enamel sign paint on canvas, 13.6 x 20 inches, 13.6 x 40 inches. Courtesy Feature, New York.

external circumstances, because their work is precisely about the way they get out of, or process, their material world—through imagination, memory, desire. Late this century, while we recognize the traumatic confusion between the “self” and the “outside”—namely, through language, culture, glamour discourse that makes you feel fat, and so on—it remains simplistic to reduce the artist (or the viewer) to a vessel for social information, to a kind of exalted target audience expressing him- or herself as a peculiar conjuncture of demographic statistics, or as a “function” of representation, unmediated by the profound strangeness of language itself.

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We do not even know what a body can do.
Spinoza

When a thing, or a person, is between categories, it's lively and interesting. While Abstract Expressionists were read as outing internally held feelings, myths, and cultural automatism by the splattering of paint in manly “acts,” art since Pop has reflected the experience that even the most intimate sensations and dreams have always already been packaged and made zestier by consumer culture.

A lot of art since Pop has recognized the word, or sign, as a thing. Postwar “theory” has emphasized that we are *buy*-products of representation, rather than vice versa; that “it” speaks rather than us. Art has revealed the packaged word as a beautiful thing while reflecting a culture which instrumentalizes its power to affect us through brand-names, institutionalized “knowledge” and consumer information, seeming to squeeze us out into some kind of post-ironic smooth space that has unfortunately erupted, lately, into a tedious dialectic between slick ultra-fetishism on one hand, and on the other, into sad, reactive “identity politics,” which seek freedom from stereotypes and mass-produced experience by promoting newer, improved subjective brand-images previously unavailable to the art public.

Like Deleuze and all “good” thinkers, Spinoza was suspicious of cultural acts that do not produce joy. While much word art is fixated on ready-made meanings, or on having fun with meaning deadened through repetition, Kay Rosen is in fact digging in to undo the operation of language as we think we know it, which can free us, if we think about it, from internalizing the “bad” ones—the producers of sad affect, the reactive tyrants and slaves compelled to shut things down with labels and identities, to correct and police things that are “becoming,” to inhibit bodies by forcing them into prearranged, predictable relations. What Kay Rosen is doing with the word has everything to do with the body, with the word as a body, with how bodies act as particles of force.

Deleuze described Spinoza's lively philosophy as this magic lens of lucidity, a looking glass through which we can free ourselves (from being oppressed by simplistic illusions about identity) by seeing what causes them: “When a body or idea enters into relation with another body or idea, it happens sometimes that the two relations form a more powerful whole, while sometimes one decomposes the other, destroys the cohesion of its parts ...”³ Affect is all: decomposition leads to sad ones, while combination increases power, and leads to joy. Kay Rosen explores the affect released when the characteristic relations of the word, or its body parts, enter into combination with its sense: the cohesion of its previous “meaning” is destroyed; but instead of confusion, it releases an increased consciousness, an affect of joy—when stuttering opens the way to a stranger perfection. ■

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NOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. and pref. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988 [1970]), 21.
2. See G.W.F. Hegel, Preface to the *Phenomenology*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 18-19.
3. Deleuze, 19.