



Kay Rosen, *Tidbit*, 1991, sign paint on canvas, 7 1/2 x 18"

KAY ROSEN FEATURE

When asked at one point about his vocation as a writer, Henry James said he wanted to be the one upon whom nothing was lost. Somewhat earlier, according to Hegel, Napoleon had realized the end of history. But if Hegel hadn't come along to reveal this, Napoleon's feat would hang unnoticed in the large jaw of eternity, and no one would care because we wouldn't have Hegel's consciousness of it. It may be true that consciousness is overrated, but without it power, stupidity, and enjoyment would go totally unrecognized. Of course you can only see the power, stupidity, and jollies of *another*, but that's a different story. In the classic master/slave scenario even language can act, but without a consciousness (i.e. a slave to come along and bear witness to it), these acts are meaningless, but nevertheless effective (which brings us to the question of art). What Kay Rosen does that is beautiful is she sets herself up as the revealer of language, but sidesteps the role of its consciousness. As its revealer, she shows it doing things that are totally above, beyond, and/or below its function as mode of communication. In this sense, she uses words as bodies: by their very forms, they emit surplus signs irreducible to mere sense or meaning. Like little Madonna Napoleons they act, and leave it to someone else to figure out what they mean.

Everything, my friends, has gotten scarcer and shabbier these days, including consciousness. What is beautiful about Rosen's work here is that it bears witness to the (increasingly) senseless effectivity of language, and it does this visually by literally showing it, not by processing it through the dark abyss of an intentional speaker. She shows us language doing things it doesn't know it does (like being visual palindromes, both sideways and up and down), which invites me or you to come along and notice something that has always been there—like the word "tidbit," or the phrase "queueup." She reveals these visual word things and reproduces them by hand in a sterile graphic format: each word is suspended in its own silver metallic void on canvas. I especially liked *Stunts* (all works 1991), which looks the same upside-down. Written phonetically without the *v*. *Divide* is an almost perfect palindrome, except that the signs over the different sounding *i*'s give it back a sense of imbalance. You get the feeling that the two kinds of phonetic signs over each "i" are competing somehow to destabilize the word. "Inez a l nez" (which is entitled *Inez Has One Nose*) is sort of a flat tire in the context of palindromes, and actually means something in French. It could be a remark by or to a simpleton, or part of a language demonstration; as a statement of the obvious its function as a lame remark

echoes the simplicity of its visual almost symmetry. *Same* (the title of another piece) is the French word "mème" written with a circumflex over both *e*'s, mutating the French word into the union of two equally weirdly spelled English "me"'s. *Ten Men Met*, written very close together with the *n*'s and *m*'s overlapping, looks like a melted-down version of "tenement."

What is moving here is how Rosen is revealing something about language, as Hegel bore witness to Napoleon, but she is doing it strictly visually through found tidbits of short-circuited speech. In their minimalness, her interventions could be mistaken for a lot of phonetical visual one-liners and "false friends," but the very fragility of these interventions emphasizes the fragility of the position of the revealer today—on one hand a totally gratuitous position, but on the other hand necessary for anything to mean anything to anyone. Language speaks: like the most interesting signs, feelings, and personalities it doesn't know what it is really saying or to whom. And it looks here like it is speaking to its own graphic body parts. The revealer always seems like he or she is just standing by doing nothing; precisely why Rosen's art is so interesting is that she exposes the art object, like words, to be most moving when it refuses to be reduced to either dumbness or explanation.

Rhonda Lieberman