



Kay Rosen, *You Lie Between Your Teeth*, 1990

A relatively simple act of obscuration can render an otherwise legible statement unclear. Kay Rosen presents a varied set of words and short phrases: 'Porous', 'Feud', 'You lie through your teeth', painted with enamel sign paint on canvas. In each work a number of the letters that go to make up the word or statement are hidden by painted squares or rectangles. In the case of *Odd-even* (all 1990) all the letters are obscured.

There are technical diagrams which indicate the way the eye scans an image. The order in which the gaze lingers is fairly shared. The process of taking information from image or word is aided by a degree of prior assumption. The application of the familiar to a situation. Rosen's presentation is inconsistent. Where in certain instances it is easy to ascertain the title of the work, in others it is impossible. In *eye level* the blocked out characters are the 'y' in eye and the two 'e's in level, thus the phrase is fairly obvious. In *Halve whole*, the only characters uncovered are the 'l' in Halve and the 'o' in Whole, consequently there is little chance to guess at a reading.

John Baldessari has made photo-pieces where elements of the image are obscured. On one level both Baldessari and Rosen expose a dilemma of censorship. Drawing a black marker across gaol correspondence, the airbrushed removal of individuals from photographs, and blanking out eyes or full heads in order to preserve anonymity, are familiar manifestations of censorship. Whilst attempting to hide things, censorship of this overt type conversely highlights and draws attention to the act itself, prompting a desire to read out the full message.

Rosen is of course involved in a kind of self-imposed censorship where some potential

revelation is proposed as a result of the initial obscuration. This combined with the ease with which it is possible to find out the full message (just look at the title) leads towards something apart from an analysis of the implications of primary censorship.

On another level the act of isolating letters from that system, written language, which gives them meaning and context, allows a consideration of each letter as an abstract sign. This abstract state, once reimposed on the letters, enables each of Rosen's pieces to assume varying degrees of symbolic resonance. Hence *Little statuettes*, a painting where everything other than the six 't's has been covered, reveals those letters to be unmistakably cruciform. *Porous* on the other hand produces a far more geometric result, leaving just two 'o's clear resulting in square, circle, square, circle, rectangle. The result of all this is a reaffirmation of what we already know. Letters remain signs despite the fact that they are usually lost within words and our ability to decode and combine those groups of signs results in the possibility of not only understanding written language but adding new words to those that already exist.

There is an old trick used occasionally by stand-up comedians. If you act like the microphone is playing up but continue to speak you can produce some interesting results. A halting stream of seemingly disconnected words comes out with gaps where the performer mouths those things that remain unheard. The booklet that accompanies this show contains a text by the artist where certain words have been blanked out. The comic potential of a Kay Rosen public lecture will apparently be denied us as papers given by the artist are read straight.

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