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A conversation with Derek Stroup – November 2007.



***EVERY DAY IS A GOOD DAY** (presently on exhibit at the A.M. Richard gallery) is the second of your monumental sculptural series, the first being **GOOD CITIZEN** (exhibited Oct. 2007 at the Pace Choate Gallery in Pleasantville, NY). How would you compare both works? Will there be a third installment?*

DS: All of the works are about creating a physical encounter with language. They are signs, basically. But these signs are awkward—gravity pulls them apart. They slump. They wobble. They are about the circumstances under which a certain kind of public address may occur. The works at the Choate Gallery were short phrases: **NOT NOW NOT NEVER**, or **OKAY OKAY OKAY** or **GOOD CITIZEN**. The physical performance of the work defines how we experience the text. I want to make sculptures that aren't simply reifications of the text, or tautological statements. My sense is that language-based artists in the 70s were attracted to tautology because it flattened the standard hierarchy of sign and signified. My interest is somewhat different. I'm trying to create a specific physical encounter—reacting to the scale and materials of the work in the same instant as you read the work. **EVERY DAY IS A GOOD DAY** is a longer text—a sentence that has functioned like a question for me: Can I believe this? Is it possible to believe this? It is a bald assertion, an intermittent possibility.



*For the past several years you have been pre-occupied with the place or perception of language in society and specifically in advertisement i.e. **UNRENTED BILLBOARDS** and consumer goods packaging (**CHIPS, CANDY**). Can you define your primary sources of inspiration?*

DS: Questions inspire the work: What does a sign do when we take the words away? What's left? An unrented billboard is an odd proposition: it isn't doing anything for anyone. There is no client, no message. As such, it exists in this strange holding pattern—almost in a state of pure sculpture—an open-air color field painting. It's like the sound between stations. With the text removed, you notice everything else about the object—the nature of its physical condition its size, small differences in construction. With the candy bars and chips, I was removing the text with Photoshop to see what would remain. The result is something simultaneously familiar and foreign. With the text removed, we see the apparatus of branding a bit more clearly, and we regain our tactile relationship with these things: We are left with an object of a certain size, a certain weight, and color. The photographs are of objects that don't exist in the real world.



Literature and French philosophy play a large role in this new body of work. How do you relate your work in this context?

DS: I was a terrible student of French in college, but a quote by **SARTRE** registered in my mind back then, and it seems to have helped me understand this project better. In his essay, *What Is Literature?* he says that for a poet, "language is a structure of the external world...he sees the reverse side of words...instead of first knowing things by their name, it seems that first he has a silent contact with them[.]" This sense of language as something physical or external to ourselves seems to move this work forward. The text in your gallery, **EVERY DAY IS A GOOD DAY** comes from the German painter **PETER DREHER**. He titled a very long series of paintings in the 80s and 90s, *Tag Um Tag Ist Guter Tag*. The phrase has always perplexed me. I mean, is he serious? I met him in California, and I'm pretty sure he IS serious. But I find that I lose and recover my own belief in this phrase over and over.



You have often mentioned that studying in Southern California was seminal in your artistic research and development. Can you elaborate?

DS: I went to Southern California with certain expectations about what might happen and some of those things did happen: I was an assistant for **ROBERT IRWIN** for about a year—it was sort of like a post-grad school seminar. I also had time because it was fairly cheap to live there (compared to New York) and privacy. Central to being in Southern California is the certain knowledge that no one cares about what you are doing. It's awful to confront this at first, but ultimately, it is very liberating. When no one cares whether you continue or stop as an artist, you either find your own reasons or you do something else. I was able to spend two years on a single project in Los Angeles. It is harder to work that way here in New York.



*The American landscape experienced through the road trip, and how you chose to interpret it, be it through photographs i.e. **SIGNS** (2007, a collaboration with **SHEAFE SATTERTHWAITE**), **FIELD GUIDE** (1992-2002- a black and white photographic essay on the theme of North American television antennas), drawings i.e. **SUBSTATIONS** (2002) or paintings i.e. **LOS ANGELES COUNTY** (1999), **UNRENTED BILLBOARDS** (2005) and **GRAFFITI ABATEMENT** (2003), is a constant in your body of work. What more to be said on that subject?*

DS: Being in transit was the central experience in my first 10 years as an artist. I was moving around the country, first to Chicago, then to Southern California. That basically stopped when I moved to New York. (Or it stopped a year or two after I got to New York. I continued to explore the landscapes and experiences of being in transit for a while, but then I stopped.) The reason is probably a mundane biographical one: I barely leave Brooklyn these days, and when I do, it's on a subway. Being on the subway has not yet become an experience I work with as an artist. Growing up on the East Coast, the large spaces of the West were a new big deal to me. My reaction to those spaces was a bit off key, however. Much of those spaces are, in fact, grand. Those spaces didn't interest me as an artist. What did interest me was the crushing repetition and monotony of those large spaces. In San Diego I lived 25 miles from my studio. This is a fairly ordinary situation there.

 There is a distinctive Pop language flavor in the idea of colorful and playful repetition. Series of works like **CANDY** (2005), **CHIPS** (2005), **MONEY** (2006) and **COOKIES** (2007.) relate to an all-american familiarity of consumer goods. Yet because of the global familiarity of the brands you have picked to illustrate your work it connects to a larger world audience. Is it that you are pre-occupied with the idea of junk food consumerism and the power of advertisement and how packaging affects daily cravings and choices? Or is there something else beneath the glossy surface?

DS: An analysis of the apparatus of branding is interesting to me, but it is secondary to my main interest with the packaged goods. I was trying to make specific objects. By removing the text and other representations, I was trying to call attention to the sculptural experiences of everyday life. Without words, we are left with these odd things. We have a sensory, phenomenological encounter with these objects along side our "reading" of these objects.

 Any Stroup publications to look forward to?

DS: I've completed three artist books so far and I'm very happy that **PRINTED MATTER** carries all three titles on their website and in their store in Chelsea. In 2008, I want to complete my fourth. Like the **ROPE SWING MANIFESTO**, I think it will be an essay or mainly a writing project. I've been making notes for an essay called, "**ADVICE**," but so far the results are somewhat discouraging. One satisfying aspect of the current sculptural word pieces is that they have brought writing into the foreground of my studio activities. I like that.

 What are you working on now?

DS: Right now I am building the installation in your gallery! After that, there are some outdoor sites in the New York area that I am looking at with the possibility of doing a word work out-of-doors. All of the erased photographs grew out of a photograph I took of a gas station in New Jersey. I am still interested in the forms of environmental graphics, so there might be some more photos of signs and buildings.

 Thank you Mr. Stroup.

DS: Thank you.

