

1-1-2007

Art and language: conceptual art

Bryan Winemiller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/studentengagement-honorscapstones>

Recommended Citation

Winemiller, Bryan, "Art and language: conceptual art" (2007). *Honors Capstones*. 186.
<https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/studentengagement-honorscapstones/186>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research & Artistry at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Capstones by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact jschumacher@niu.edu.

Northern Illinois University

Art and Language:

Conceptual Art

A thesis submitted to the
University Honors Program
for partial fulfillment of
requirements of the Bachelors of Fine Arts Degree

with Upper Division Honors

School of Art

by

Bryan Winemiller

April 19, 2007

University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

Capstone title: Art and Language: Conceptual Art

Student name: Bryan Winemiller

Faculty Supervisor: Karen Brown

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Karen Brown", written over the printed name.

Faculty Approval Signature:

Department of: Drawing: Studio Art

Date of Approval: April 18th, 2007

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge all the people that helped me get to where I am today. I especially would like to thank Karen Brown, my senior capstone advisor, for working along my side along this journey. Also would like to thank her for the many hours of help and words of encouragement that she has given me.

Abstract

This essay discusses the history and influences of my senior exhibition in the Neptune North Gallery at Northern Illinois University. I discuss the beginning of the Conceptual Art movement and address the subsets and styles that are similar or influential to my senior exhibition. Next, I discuss four artists within the Conceptual Art movement that have been influential to me. In conclusion I describe and explain the body of work that goes along with this essay.

Art and Language: Conceptual Art

“Advance information about the concept of art and about an artist’s concept is necessary to the appreciation and understanding of contemporary art.” –Joseph Kosuth. Conceptual Art arrived in the art scene between the years 1967 and 1972 with large amount of artists being involved in this movement (Harrison 29). Conceptual Art is art in which the concept or ideas involve in the work are important in addition to traditional aesthetic and material concerns (Atkins 75). The work of art being about the idea rather the object is most important component of conceptual art.

“In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made before hand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” – Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, *Artforum*, June 1967.

The artists within the Conceptual Art movement during the mid 1960’s through the 1970’s were reacting against the growth of the commercialized art world of the 1960’s and the formalism as it was then articulated by the influential New York art critic Clement Greenberg (Morgan 33). Among most Formalist critics, Conceptual Art was considered an aesthetically deficient art form. While a small amount of other critics, say it came to represent the apogee of late Modernism.

Conceptual artists take the role from the critics in terms of framing their own propositions, ideas, and concepts (Meyer VIII). Conceptual Art makes the idea clear within the work, which divides it from other contemporary art. Other Contemporary Art

is not concerned with defining the intention of the work, but mostly attending to its appearance. In art only the artist can reveal the idea of the work, which remains hidden in other Contemporary Art, thus becoming everybody, guessing game and/ or responsibility.

Under these circumstance, there is a need for critical interpretative.

“Conceptual Art, as a critical practice, finds itself directly embedded in the realm of organized meaning; but historical understanding means that that work begins to understand itself; it becomes critical of those very processes of organized meaning in the act of self-understanding. It criticizes this system through the act of criticizing itself.”

– Joseph Kosuth, “Within the Context: Modern and Critical Practice” *Ghen: Coupure*, 1977.

In this quote Joseph Kosuth implies that Conceptual Art is a method of investigation similar to other methods in the natural and social sciences (Morgan 35). In Conceptual Art, the artist can use all sorts of forms from physical reality to the written and spoken word (Atkins 75).

The Conceptual artists were creating work that did not resemble traditional art objects by using aspects of semiotics, feminism, and popular culture (Atkins 75). In the galleries the viewer would see documents describing how the artists think, especially in the case of linguistic works that assumed the form of words on the wall.

The work created by these artists was not done in the traditional styles of painting or sculpture but rather other art forms such as Performance, Video, and Earth Art. In Conceptual Art, the artist can use all sorts of forms from physical reality to the written

and spoken word (Atkins 75). Later the umbrella term to describe these non traditional styles was the Conceptualism. The artist and theorist Allan Kaprow, described conceptualism as an interactive form of communication. In the June 1967, *Artforum*, Sol LeWitt states:

“Since no form is intrinsically superior to another, the artist may use any form, from an expression of words (written or spoken) to physical reality, equally.”

Soon enough by the end of the 1960’s, Conceptual Art quickly became an international phenomenon with informal associations of Conceptual artists spanning the globe, from Yugoslavia (the OHO group) to Australia (the Inhibodress group) (Atkins 76). Other artists that are talked greatly about as a conceptual artist are Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, On Kawara, Hanne Daboven, and many more. Many of these “conceptual artists” may not even call themselves “conceptual artists”.

Conceptual Art consists of many subsets, including Body Art, Media Art, and Sound Art. Body Art, a precursor of Performance Art, and is just what the name Body Art implies; an art form in which the artists’ body is the medium, the subject and the object, replacing the more conventional wood, stone, or paint on canvas. (Atkins 59) The Body Art movement of the late 1960’s in United States, Europe, and Australia, is exemplified by artists including Ana Mendieta, Bruce Nauman, and Carolee Schneemann.

Another subset of Conceptual Art is Media Art, and its chief precursor is Pop Art, which uses the visual iconography of Popular Culture (Atkins 115). Media in this case refers not to the physical mediums of art, such as acrylic paint, oil paint, or watercolor,

but to the mass media. Most media artist has been highly critical of the mass media and their methods of manipulating public opinion. Conceptual artists used language like signs for mass media (Atkins 167).

Like Media Art, other Conceptual Art movements were formed in the 1970's. Sound Art is work that is composed primarily of sound while being made by visual artist or by performance artists. Sound Art, most of the time, would be presented in a traditional visual art venue, such as galleries, museums, and or performance sites (Atkins 175). Some conceptual artists like Bruce Nauman created sound works while at the same time working in other media such as installations and video.

During the 1960's artists and critics became interested in semiotics after the appearance of Pop Art (Atkins 166). Semiotics is the science of the signs required in all communication, and language of itself is the most universal system of signs. The piece "One and Three Chairs", by the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, exemplifies a semiotic approach to the nature of meaning (Atkins 167). "One and Three Chairs", consists of a wooden folding chair, a full-scale photograph of that chair, and photographic enlargement a dictionary definition of the word "chair".

The discipline of semiotics is a tool to help us understand how language works and how meaning is assigned. In the language of semiotics, the definition of the chair is a "signifier", the wooden chair itself is "signified", and together they equal the "sign". The argument Kosuth has presented with that simple equation, by providing the photograph of the chair as a substitute for the viewers' perception of the real chair.

Joseph Kosuth, an influential American Conceptual artist whose work generally strives to explore the nature of art, focuses on ideas of what art is, rather than making art

“per se”. He also discusses the role of art in the future and its relationship to philosophy. A strategic feature of Joseph Kosuth’s work is the tendency toward blandness in graphic presentation (Harrison 30). Kosuth and fellow conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner were aware of the limitations of language in terms of what it can signify in their work, and how dependent it is on the context in which it is read (Morgan 18). In 1978-79, Kosuth did a series of work called “Text / Context”, in which he attempted to illustrate how meaning is transformed according to its location and placement. The “Text / Context” series were done on billboards within several countries. The series attempted to reference art directly within the non-art-environment by using these billboards in urban environments (Morgan 104).

Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Krzysztof Wodiczko looked for public spaces for their interventions (Osborne 176). The most prominent feature of Jenny Holzer’s work is composed of words, which are printed, carved, or electronic (Danto 61). For over two decades, Holzer’s medium has been words and language (Danto 62). These pieces over the years have been done with electronic signs and large xenon projections that both illuminate and provoke. For her interventionist work she adapted a form derived from preexisting language-based practices in Conceptual Art (Osborne 177). The words that she used confronts us with some frightening aspects of our culture, forcing the viewer to deal with the unpredictable subject matter of war, violence, racism, rape, sex, disease, birth, and death. She draws attention to the subliminal influences of social conditioning. Her work is consistently deeper than just words (Danto 65).

Another Conceptual artist that speaks to us in so many words is Barbara Kruger. Although she is a graphic designer, she does not create signs, symbols, or messages that promote mass-market consumption or corporate identity (Heller 205).

“Kruger’s works are direct and evoke an immediate response. Usually her style involves the cropping of a magazine or newspaper image enlarged in black and white. The enlargement of the image is done as crudely as possible to monumental proportions. A message is stenciled on the image, usually in white letters against a background of red. The text and image are unrelated in an effort to create anxiety by the audience that plays on the fears of society.” (Janson 992)

Kruger she has been making image and text montages since the early 1980’s (Osborne 177). Kruger’s past work consists of installations comprised of video, film, audio, and projection (Heller 207). Her current work is about the kindnesses and brutalities of how we are to one another. Like Jenny Holzer, she investigates how one receives verbal and visual messages circulated by anonymous sources of power (Osborne 117). Her work is usually declarative and making common use of such pronouns as “you”, “I”, “we”, and “they”. The gender of the “I”, “you”, and “we” is not determined, making the pieces non-gender specific. Typically her work incorporate black-and-white photographs taken from another media source that she has cropped, enlarged, and juxtaposed with white-on-red captions with strident verbal statements or phrases (Linker

12). Kruger, can be said to have played a key role in the development and expansion of Contemporary Art.

Another inspiring artist in the Contemporary Art scene is John Baldessari. John's work may be said to be an important influence on young 'postmodernist' photographers (Morgan 166). Overtime Baldessari has played and continues to play with and critique popular culture. His early work consisted of canvas paintings that were empty but for painted statements derived from contemporary art theory (Van bruggen 19). He works in an adopted sophisticated technique like cropping and montage to juxtapose press photographs and movie stills from unknown or forgotten films. His works are often layered, humorous compositions that tell us something, a story, a joke, and or a riddle with a title or text.

Much of Baldessari's work that I have noticed involves pointing to inform the viewer not only what to look at but how to make selections and comparisons. Like myself, Baldessari has expressed his interest in language, which operates by an arbitrary and mandatory system of rules. Much of my work has been the study of understanding and learning what language is.

Does color help us recognize objects and scenes? That question might seem like a simple question and one with an obvious answer (Enns 116). Color does matter for the recognition of objects in which color helps determine the objects identity. For example a lemon and a lime are very similar in shape but different in color. At a quick glance it may be the case that color is the only clue to their difference. With these ideas I started to play with color in my art work.

12). Kruger, can be said to have played a key role in the development and expansion of Contemporary Art.

Another inspiring artist in the Contemporary Art scene is John Baldessari. John's work may be said to be an important influence on young 'postmodernist' photographers (Morgan 166). Overtime Baldessari has played and continues to play with and critique popular culture. His early work consisted of canvas paintings that were empty but for painted statements derived from contemporary art theory (Van bruggen 19). He works in an adopted sophisticated technique like cropping and montage to juxtapose press photographs and movie stills from unknown or forgotten films. His works are often layered, humorous compositions that tell us something, a story, a joke, and or a riddle with a title or text.

Much of Baldessari's work that I have noticed involves pointing to inform the viewer not only what to look at but how to make selections and comparisons. Like myself, Baldessari has expressed his interest in language, which operates by an arbitrary and mandatory system of rules. Much of my work has been the study of understanding and learning what language is.

Does color help us recognize objects and scenes? That question might seem like a simple question and one with an obvious answer (Enns 116). Color does matter for the recognition of objects in which color helps determine the objects identity. For example a lemon and a lime are very similar in shape but different in color. At a quick glance it may be the case that color is the only clue to their difference. With these ideas I started to play with color in my art work.

In one of my series of work, "The Red Dot Series," I address one of language's oldest illusions, the color contrast, while also addressing misrepresentation. Each print is misrepresented, for example, the word "blue" printed in red ink. Outside of these prints and art, color misrepresentation occurs. For example, a lime may be painted yellow and labeled as a lemon with out considering what it really is. Objects and people are labeled and misjudged everyday. But, how then, is that meaning communicated? If meaning is determined by the language we use, what happens when that language gets interrupted?

"The Red Dot Series" consists of four screen prints displayed horizontally on the gallery wall. Each of the four prints is done in all pure red acrylic ink. "Blue dot" consists of the title blue dot over a solid circle with a radius of two inches. All the remaining prints, "Orange Dot", "Purple Dot", and "Green Dot" are similar by having their titles printed over the solid red four inch circle.

In the Neptune North Gallery "Does Our World Have its Wires Crossed" stretches thirty feet across the wall. This drawing depicts utility poles and wires. The wires are scattered across this long stretch of paper, referring to network communication.

A utility pole or telephone pole is a pole upon which telephone network equipment is situated, although with the advent of cell phones and wireless internet, telephone poles and wires seem to be obsolete technology. Nevertheless, the telephone pole has been around since the mid nineteenth century. The telephone pole began to change with technology though the twenty century; for example the stereotypical but now redundant crossbeam used to mount the rows of insulators for open wire telephone circuits was removed. Although these traditional poles have all but vanished from the

urban landscape, some can still be seen in remote or unimproved areas, beside railroads, for example.

In "Does Our World Have its Wires Crossed," the utility pole and wires directly address my personal struggles to read, write, and communicate effectively. In a literal sense, the wires of communication are crossed or, to some viewers may even appear broken. The wires depicted do not flow through the picture frame naturally but proceed along tangents and multiple wire interceptions. There are even breaks in the wire symbolizing complete disruption and breakdown in communication. The depictions of the utility poles and wires in this piece represent the complexity of way that humans communicate using various forms of language.

Constantly, humans create a language cycle that is consistently interrupted and in a state of flux and change. Often unknowingly, we assign meaning arbitrarily to empty forms. As the form and its attached meaning get used and interpreted over time, the language cycle continues its never-ending journey. This never-ending journey is a journey that transcends all barriers to conquer our thoughts and dictate our actions.

Some poles are dense and congested with tangled cut wires from repairs and changes due to technological advances. The presence of power lines, telephone poles, and wires gives me and others an eerie and distressed feeling when observing them. The buzzing noise as the current flows through the wires makes my skin crawl.

In Conceptual Art, artists utilize Sound Art to help the viewer experience and understand the meaning of the art work. The feelings that I experience with power lines are visual along with environmental. The sound of electric current and information transmitting through the wires has a noise in likeness of a buzzing or a humming. For my

exhibit I wanted to have a audio element that adds to the gallery environment. I wanted sounds that relate to technology, communication, and language.

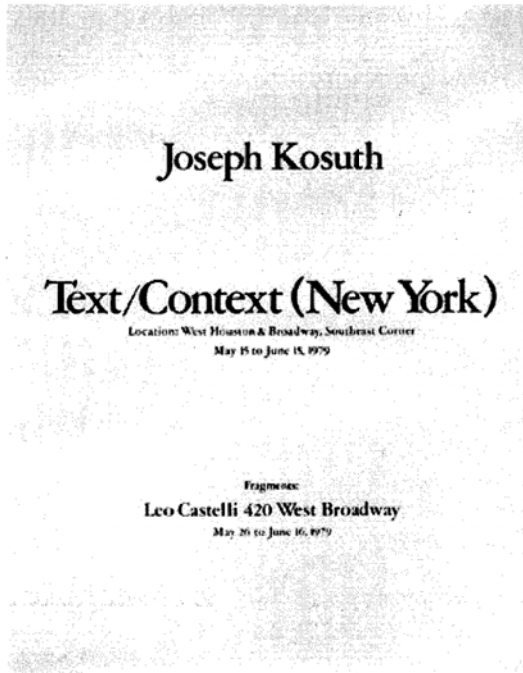
In the everyday we are bombarded with information and sounds which we must filter. To represent this bombardment, I had three sound elements playing at the same time. Although each one alone can be soothing and relaxing, together they are almost overwhelming. These sounds played over the compact disc players were from the compact disc "Reich Remixed", "18", and the original motion picture soundtrack of "K-Pax". I used two of the same arranged compact discs playing two different tracks at the same time on different compact disc players. Lastly I used the clicking of a fan for the last element to represent bombardment of information and sounds.

Conceptual Art has been a specific area of focus and influence on my artwork during my time as an art student and drawing major at Northern Illinois University. Conceptual Art refers to significant movement and is the major topic of my senior capstone. As a graduating senior in the fine arts department, I have crafted a senior show along with this senior capstone as required for graduation from the program.

My work addresses the inherent challenges within that force of language that often cause misunderstanding and misdirection in my daily life. My personal and academic life is plagued by interruptions in communication that create conflict and confusion often without any intention at all.

Work Cited

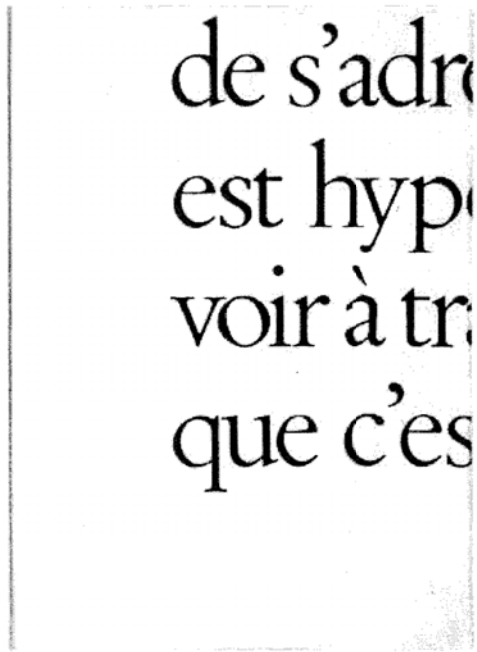
- Atkins, Robert. Art Speak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present. Addeville Press. New York. 1997.
- Danto, Arthur C. Embodied Meanings. Farrar Stravs Giroux. New York. 1994.
- Enns, James T. The Thinking Eye, The Seeing Brain, Explorations in Visual Cognition. W.W. Norton 's Company. 2004.
- Harrison, Charles. Essays on Art & Language. Basil Blackwell. 1991.
- Heller, Steven. The Graphic Designer Reader. Allworth Press. 2002.
- Janson, H.W. & Anthony F. Janson. History of Art. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers. 2005.
- Kosuth, Joseph. "Within the Context: Modern and Critical Practice" *Ghen: Coupure*, 1977.
- Linker, Kate. Love for sale: The Words and Pictures of Barbara Kruger. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers. 1990.
- LeWitt, Sol. "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." *Artforum*. June 1967.
- Meyer, Ursula. Conceptual Art. E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc. 1972.
- Morgan, Robert C. Art into Ideas: Essays on Conceptual Art. Cambridge University Press. 1996.
- Morgan, Robert C. Conceptual Art. An American Retrospective. McFarland & Company. Inc.. 1994.
- Osborne, Peter. Conceptual Art. Phaidon Press. 2002.
- Van bruggen, Coosje. John Baldessari. Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.. 1990.



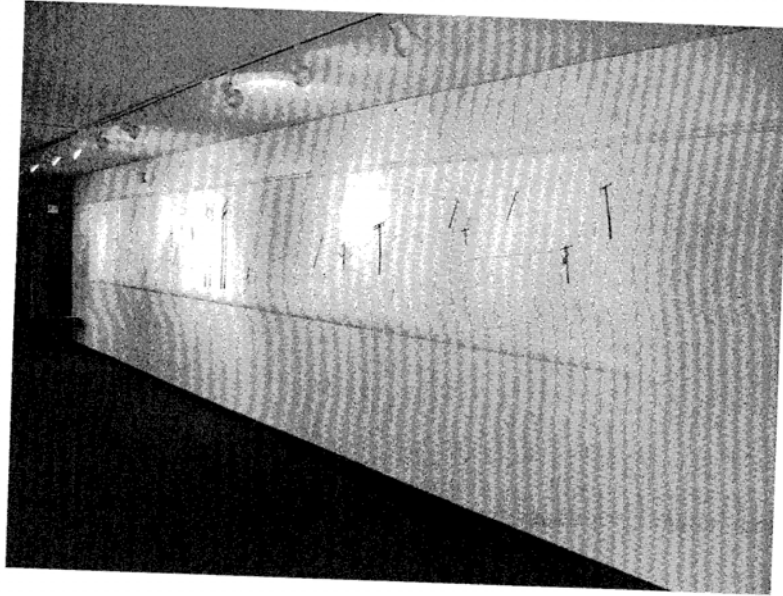
Joseph Kosuth
"Text/Context"
poster

participe
Sa
l'instar
eignant

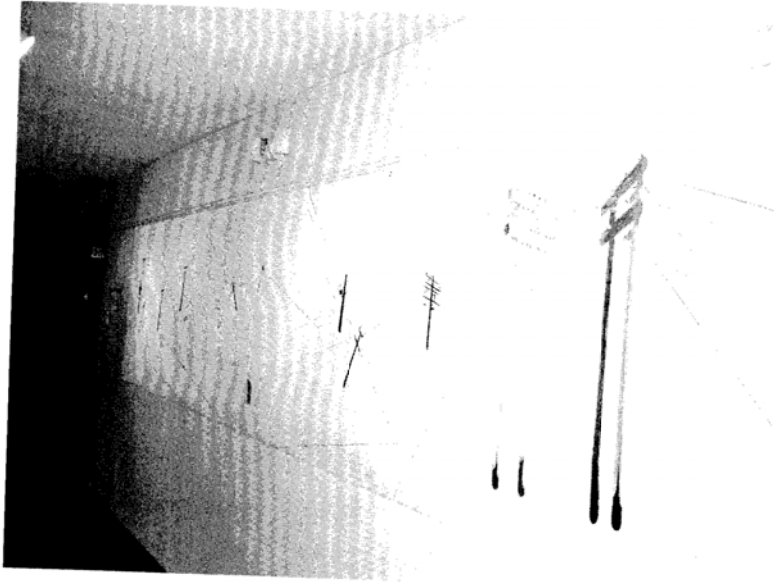
Joseph KOSUTH
Text/Context 1978
66 x 46 cm
26 x 18 1/8 in



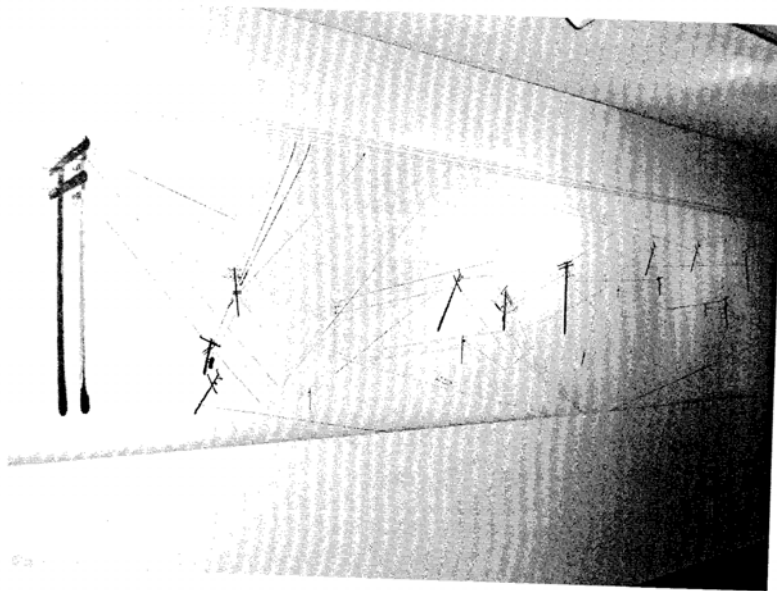
Joseph KOSUTH
Text/Context 1978
66 x 46 cm
26 x 18 1/8 in



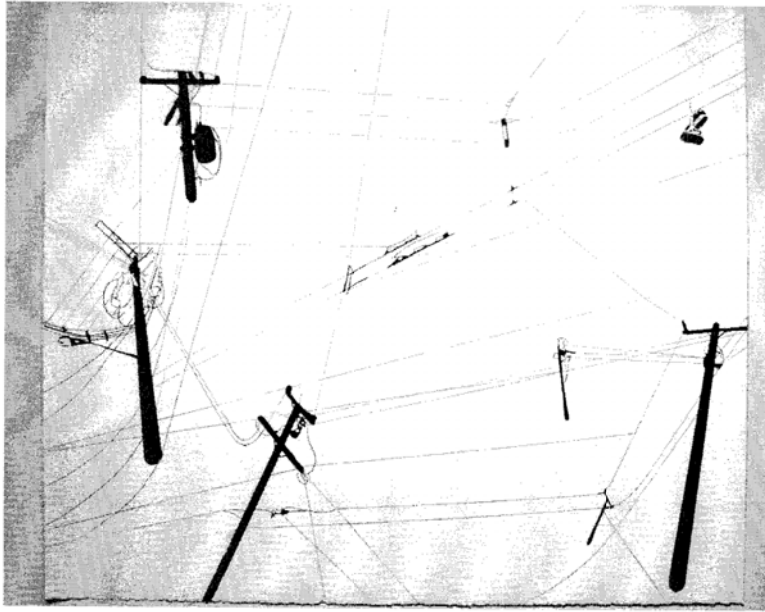
Bryan Winemiller
Does Our World Have its Wires Crossed?
42" x 360"
2007



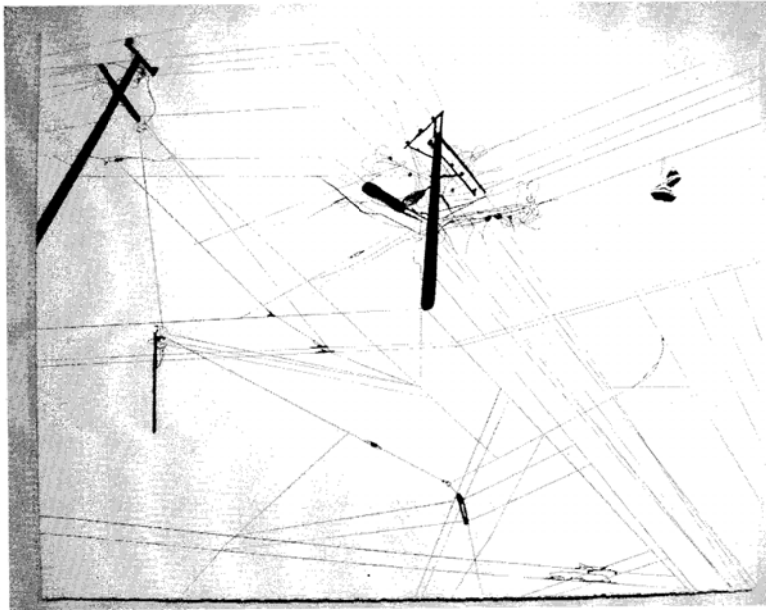
Left side



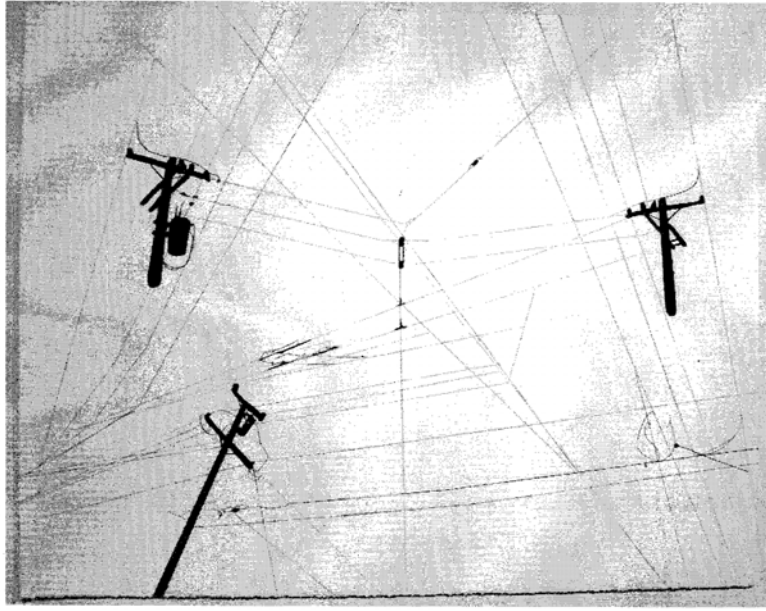
Right side



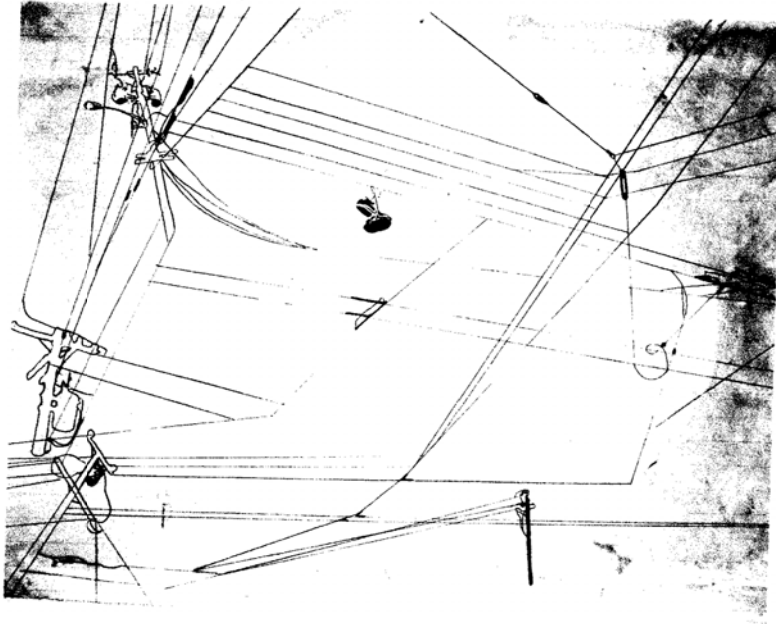
Bryan Winemiller
Communication Chaos #1
.22" x 28"
2007



Bryan Winemiller
Communication Cias #2
22" x 28"
2007



Bryan Winemiller
Communication Cias #4
22" x 28"
2007



Bryan Winemiller
Communication Ciaos #6
22" x 28"
2007

blue dot



orange dot



green dot



purple dot



Bryan Winemiller
Red Dot Series
12" x 16" each
2007