

ARTFORUM

Judith Russi Kirshner
December 1990



read read rosens

BREAKING DOWN GRAMMAR and disfiguring words, Kay Rosen aims to encode meaning, then engender reading. Her paintings of language create a fine tension, holding together visual and verbal, sense and nonsense, in an esthetic stranglehold. At the moment you understand the language, successfully linking syllables into functional words, Rosen disrupts language's symbolic order. Meaning is consciously liberated, altered, and even exceeded. Metonymic shifts as easy and as fantastic as that of homophobia to homophonia seem logical in a corpus where grass skirts are associated with flesh cuts.

However Rosen's signs function iconically, one reads painting and representation at the same time that one sees writing, even narrative. In *noink: pigmentless*, 1990, the words of the title are inscribed on a pink ground, and despite the absence of color and meaning they suggest, the work overwhelmingly invokes the presence of farm animals. A paradox of Rosen's art is the final inadequacy of verbal representations to her project: these signlike paintings are finally objects, and meticulously rendered ones. But though the form of a letter, with its curves and contours, is almost coaxed or sculpted into being, the brushstrokes are delicately uniform, hiding all trace of signature. Similarly, decisions about format and scale, except in larger installation pieces, are usually determined by the size of the drafting table. Even color choices are restricted, in that Rosen makes them from the predetermined palette offered by the 1 Shot brand of sign-painter's lettering enamels—an equivalent structure to an alphabet, an arbitrary system from which to make infinite combinations. It is

lora reynolds gallery

entirely coincidental and at the same time almost predictable that the company's advertising motto should read and look like a Rosen work: "Aim—for the Best. . .for the Stroke of Genius."

Since she began working with language (as she has sporadically since 1969, intensively since 1982), Rosen has negotiated between what is meant, what is seen, and how it sounds when it is spoken, between philology and phonetics, in the linguistic spaces between cultural conventions and subjectivity. Her constructions are built on instrumental pairs, binary oppositions, of writing, reading, and painting, seeing. Rosen's materials are the fundamentals and differences of word play, of poetry and of jokes: semiotic, semantic, syntactic, rhetorical, and phonetic commonplaces. Her tone can vary from the street slang and rap discourse of "yo mama" to the ivory-tower classical references of *PGBS*, 1988, which stacks the silent initial letter of "Ptolemy" on those of "Mnemosyn," "Psyche," and "Pshaw," then makes its title out of a pun that combines television and the name of the English playwright.

Though her linguistic repertoire is often fairly basic, homonyms and synonyms, Rosen's weaving and overlapping of elements are intricate and rich, despite the work's minimal format. Disobeying prescriptive correct spellings, she spells descriptively, phonetically, or just to get a laugh. She ignores grammatical rules, revels in variant or deviant usages, to craft an alternate mode of verbal communication that pushes the viewer to the exercise of deduction. In her attention to typefaces, colors, and graphic compositions, Rosen fetishizes the look or image of letters, words, and phrases, or at least recontextualizes them in the realm of the pictorial. They no longer belong exclusively to verbal lexicons but are subordinated to the esthetic whole, gaining more autonomy as signs than they had as text.

Although Rosen's work recalls '70s conceptualism and concrete poetry arrangements, its fondness for puns also provokes comparison with the work of John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha. Historical precedents include the Dada optophonetic poems of Raoul Hausmann, intended as critiques of cultural sign systems, and the typographic experiments of the Futurists, as well as the puns of Marcel Duchamp. More directly, Rosen's work can be situated in the social and political context of recent women's art. During the last two decades women have not only claimed the authority of language, they have made their authorship overt, even the subject of their work; the multiple ways in which language constructs gender have been examined and exploited by artists like Nancy Dwyer, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Nancy Spero. Rosen's paintings are neither as sensational as Holzer's media assertions nor as outspoken as Kruger's glamorous propositions and warnings. But they nevertheless embody a conscious breaking, marking, and exchange of meaning between sound and sight—a dissecting of language into structural units, then an engendering of unauthorized subjects for art.

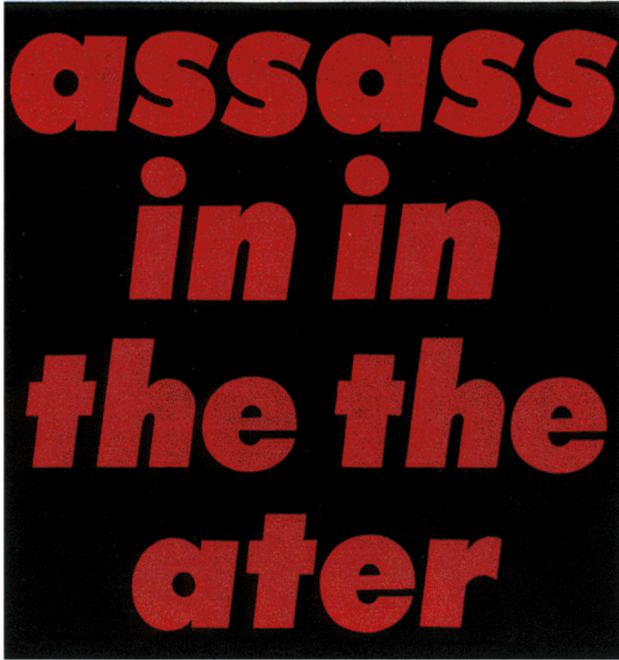
Rosen is a disciplined editor, using analogy and resemblance, mirror images and inversions, to fabricate the unimagined from the most mundane and undervalued bits of speech. Her language is remarkable in its variation. In *t-h-w-a-r-t*, 1989, a phonetic spelling of the letters of the title articulates a message that can be read as a garbled injunction to teach art, an activity that Rosen implies can be subversive. In his *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, Duchamp translated the sound of a French sentence into letters that the viewer then translates back into the original words; in *t-h-w-a-r-t*, letters are translated into sounds, which, written out, suggest a completely new phrase. Often visual puns, typographical ascenders and descenders, mirror images, and doubled letters echo in verbal puns. But juggling letters like motifs—how they look as they repeat, and how they sound—Rosen also deploys the margins of the canvas, the lack of space that breaks a word. These interstices that splinter language, these interactions between language and the space of the canvas and then the space of the wall, are critical. In *Tree Lined Street*, 1989, for example, the left and right margins shave off slender verticals from the title phrase and abbreviate the last word by two letters, leaving pictorial rows of trees on either side of the central street line.



Kay Rosen, *Tree Lined Street*, 1989, enamel sign paint on canvas, 16 x 10".



Kay Rosen, *Edgar Degas*, 1987, enamel sign paint on canvas, diptych, each canvas 10 x 10 x 2 1/4".



Kay Rosen, *John Wilkes Booth*, 1987, enamel sign paint on canvas, 20 x 20".

92 ARTFORUM

Psychological as well as semantic elements play a part in this art, as they do in humor. In the comics, according to Rosen, "words and thoughts aren't given much weight, encased as they are in balloons, clouds, and bubbles."⁽¹⁾ Her paintings dispense with the comic strip's figurative image to concentrate on the verbal one. The work relates to an idea discussed by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905, where he notes the correspondences between the condensation, displacement, and indirect representation of the joke work and the similar processes in the dream work. Freud suggests that the joke arises involuntarily, "an 'absence,' a sudden release of intellectual tension . . . all at once the joke is there—as a rule ready-clothed in words."⁽²⁾ For him, jokes originate in the unconscious. Obviously his hypothesis doesn't match the processes of Rosen's work, but as his argument continues it becomes more applicable. The joke, with its often peculiar brevity and its "multiple use of the same material, play upon words, and similarity of sound . . . [is] a localized economy, and . . . the original intention of jokes was to obtain a yield of pleasure . . . which had been permitted at the stage of play but had been dammed up

by rational criticism in the course of intellectual development."⁽³⁾ Rosen maneuvers this economy of the joke, the one-liner, striving consciously for a sense of play and for the seeming appearance of the unconscious. She adapts processes that are, as Julia Kristeva writes, "presyntactic and pre-logical. . . . [in] a *verbal code* dominated by the two axes of metaphor and metonymy."⁽⁴⁾ Her excavations relate to Freud's insight that when the thought behind intentional jokes "plunges into the unconscious [the psyche] is merely seeking there for the ancient dwelling-place of its former play with words."⁽⁵⁾

Humor is one of the more politically sensitive exchanges we have, and it is central to Rosen's project of jabbing at rational signifying practices. Her work rarely requires a theoretical arsenal of decoding technique—merely the sympathetic, literate viewer that all artistic endeavor deserves—but the central position of language in the last decade's art illuminates her intuitive deconstructive techniques, and her understanding of the place of rhetorical and discursive approaches in feminist strategies of empowerment. On a pink placard carried by Chicago buses early this year, the word "AIDS" was followed by a dictionarylike chain of interpretive terms suggesting not illness but assistance. For an exhibition at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center, New York, in 1989, Rosen invented the word "homophonia" as a label for an ongoing alphabetical list of words and clichés, including linguistic readymades that contain two like structures, repetitions of identical letters or syllables, for example mimicry, taffeta, titillating; gently and obliquely, this collection attempts to familiarize sexual choices that have been forced to the margins. Kristeva's observations on "Clarity, Night and Color" in language are relevant to Rosen's strategies: "A work where the subject is not 'empty' under the appearance of multiple meaning, but is a 'surplus of subject' exceeding the subject through nonsense, in contradiction to which a symbolic formality comes along to posit the meaning(s) as well as the subject."⁽⁶⁾



Kay Rosen, *12 works*, 1990, gouache and/or sign paint on paper, each canvas 20 x 30". Installation view.



Kay Rosen, *Surprise!*, 1988, enamel sign paint on canvas, 32 x 20".

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

Kay Rosen, *The Man, 1988*, black and white porcelain, 20 x 40".



Kay Rosen, *Sp-split II Out!*, 1988, enamel sign paint on canvas, 32 x 20".

Directly political are a series of paintings on poster board, from 1984–85, that utilize the entire arsenal of effects Rosen has streamlined. Cartoon images of lips illustrate the spelled-out word “Mum,” and echo the shapes of the letters. The work’s title, *Read Lips*, reiterates the lips’ color (and incidentally anticipates a more recent presidential imperative). The brash combination of tabloid-style typeface and jazzy graphics is a condensed signal for the tangled relationships among mother, speech, and sex. Here the psychic processes of humor underline the role of maternal language, presymbolic and intentionally infantile, in an American version of Kristeva’s observation that “craftsmen of Western art reveal better than anyone else the artist’s debt to the maternal body and/or motherhood’s entry into symbolic existence—that is, translibidinal jouissance, eroticism taken over by the language of art.”(7) Although the title instructs us to read, it is not clear who is speaking and who is keeping mum. Is the mother silenced or silencing, can the silenced mother read or be read? Rosen will push a cliché to its illogical extreme, to willful ambiguities. In the two panels of *Alabama*, 1985, one black on white, the other white on black, the political ante is upped as the blind, the bland, and the blond lead each other to death. Cain and Abel become the prototypical haves and have-nots. Not merely a telegraphic story-teller, Rosen preys on indeterminate meanings and manipulates Freudian slips to represent social and political commentary across the surfaces of her pieces. “It is as possible to go down with one liner as with another.”

Rosen makes the most of lists, transforming their linear potential so that they simultaneously undercut while they add up. In *Palimpsest*, 1989, John X and Benedict X begin a list of names, united by the terminating column of X’s, that includes not only popes but kings and concludes with Malcolm X. The reader is caught up short, first by the impact of the African-American leader’s name, then by the switch from Latin numeral to English letter. There is a kind of inevitability to this sequence that is broken by the politics of that seemingly simple shift. Like a comedian, Rosen fine-tunes her visual timing, judging how long it takes us to read a list and how many lines long a list can be before we lose interest in it. Like a poet, she shapes rhythm, timing, and alignment in a variant historical chronology that is neither ignorant nor overburdened by respect for tradition. *Palimpsest* is an effective reconstruction of the succession of patriarchal power. To list Malcolm X, for whom X marked his lack of known heritage, as a descendant of church fathers like Leo X, who protected their place in history with Roman numerals, is an inspired filiation that deftly subverts accepted chronologies. Revising and rewriting, Rosen’s list demonstrates that any master narrative is vulnerable.

In another list work from 1987, a composer’s life’s work is summarized in 24 lines of type that reduce his production to this number of sonatas, that number of concertos, other numbers of songs, funeral odes, waltzes, and so on. The name of the piece: *Liszt*. Another list piece, *The Man*, 1989, begins with the proposition, in the subjunctive mood, “The Man Who Would Be King.” After wry excursions into gender reversal and media personalities—the man who would be B. B. King, Queen Bee, Bea Arthur, and so on—the list concludes with the man who would be Art King. Printed in a classy Roman typeface, the text frames and situates a critique of the pretensions and, more precisely, the self-representations of status, so dramatic in the art world. Rosen’s lists make history itself seem arbitrary, formal, and overdue for imaginative reconstruction. Collecting fragments—jotting down things we need to do or, more to the point, to remember—can be construed as an insignificant, even feminine organizational process, neat as a shopping list. But here the activity becomes a critique of historical memory, offering alternative readings to traditional narrative, the discourse of power, and, of course, the power of discourse.

A different assault on a gendered art history occurs when Rosen selects and rearranges proper names, as in the small red-and-yellow diptych of 1987 that represents and rhymes the name “Edgar Degas” as “Ed Ga De Ga.” In a dazzling new painting, *antititan*, 1990, Rosen displays the name of the Venetian master on an eponymous brilliant red ground; her coinage breaks down into a denial, both as the obvious “anti-Titian” and as a collection of nonsense syllables: “an tititi an.” Gender and genius, not to mention the calibrated

lora reynolds gallery

spacing between words, are also instrumental in *Six*, 1988, in which abstract painting is reduced to two male artists, “tworkov” and “twombly,” whose names enclose words for female labor and are followed by the typolike word “twomen.” The title comes from the addition of the three twos. Rosen often uses the names of her works in ways that recall the game show *Jeopardy*, where we have the answers but it pays to know the questions. In *John Wilkes Booth*, 1987, it is the title that reveals the identity of the figure described in the text: “assassin in the theater,” previously read as redundant syllables arranged in doubles on the canvas. Here a kind of sleight of eye occurs as we visualize the theatrical murder, the glamor of red letters on a black ground dramatizing cause and effect. The artist exploits her viewer/reader’s desire to see something where nothing exists except its sign.

The breaches in Rosen’s work come at the expense of authority, the authority of syntactical and pictorial rules. But Rosen has also expanded on the one-liner to create dramas that look like signs but tell stories, complete with action, suspense, murder, a hero named Ed, and some of the shortest plots ever shown. These five canvases from 1988, which evoke the mood of film noir, use margins, negative spaces, and run-on leftover word fragments to break the rules of capitalization and invent new ones that control the narrative. Activating the drama is the past-tense suffix “ed,” indicating time but repeated autonomously and shifted to uppercase to become a proper name, and to generate a character. In the first painting (black letters on white), *Surprise!*, Rosen invents female protagonists, Rose and Blanch, whose fairy-tale names reverse into verbs at the sight of Ed. In *Technical Difficulties* (black letters on silver), Ed finds that Mike’s mike’s dead, but when we then discover, in *Sp-spit it Out* (black on ivory), that Ed is a stutterer, a technical difficulty is transposed into a murder. The elegance of Rosen’s deconstruction is apparent in these two works, where we imitate the defects of enunciation as we read the duplications. And in the white-on-black *Blanks*, which doubles the stakes by moving to the diptych form, Rosen undermines the expected surprise ending by converting it into a riddle: what has holes and flies? The answer locates Ed himself, painted upside down, permanently past tense, and spatially left for dead on the canvas, “deadEd.” The word “blanks” describes absence as well as the impotent ammunition that nevertheless overdetermines the riddle of the diptych: Ed speaks, then dies, canceling the speaking subject.

As readings multiply, one savors Rosen’s unorthodox mixture of minimal graphics and sly humor, the repeated sibilants of a speech defect performing an erosion of discursive structure. As a summation of this series, however, there is an afterword, *Ex-Ed*, a rather sober painting, despite its red letters, that can be interpreted as another death: the loss of memory. Its inscription takes a brand-name cassette tape, *Memorex*, as a simulation of a cognitive process, or of feeble attempts to reconstruct the past. To represent the flawed process of recollecting, the letter x moves line by line through the piece from right to left, in antagonistic contrariness to the usual direction of reading, each time altering the word “memory” so that it is still legible as an image but reconstituted with gaps and losses.

Over the past five years Rosen has refined her technique, working to make increasingly terse formats increasingly suggestive. Since the “Ed” series she has dispensed with characters and with narrative, and has developed a device of ranking lines of syllables or letters that come to represent an action, though in phrases so condensed as to demand the interpretive effort of the viewer. These declarations are reduced to three lines of three or four letters, all uppercase. In *Torsos Rot*, 1989, the vertical alignment and repetition of the central vowel literally embody corporeality, the body, and fear of its inevitable decay. In the middle of what Rosen refers to as the “body of linguistic phenomena” appears horizontally the universal sign for aid, SOS; and since the phrase is a palindrome, its appearance on the canvas sets up a magnetic play of symmetries. Rosen squeezes out a feminist’s lament in the muscular condensation of *Go On Goon*, 1987, and in the alliterative encounter, moving from embrace to revulsion, of *Hug Hugh Ugh*, 1989. She builds dramatic constructions from verbal coincidences that she renders conspicuous: in *I-O-U*, 1988, three words that refer to or sound like sounds—sob, rip, swak—become abbreviations for an excruciatingly economic if unoriginal solution to repaying a debt. Although the work looks aloof and cool, sharply declarative, it is not impersonal, and it tempts us to imagine our own versions of sweet revenge enacted on dead SOB’s. Having shed syntax and syllables, Rosen also scraps letters: in *debris and detritus*, 1989, the five vowels *e i e i u* are residues on a yellow ground after the debris and detritus of consonants are removed. And *ditto, mimic, xerox*, 1989, sets up the clearest demonstration of the processes of duplication, the isolated double consonants *tt, mm, xx* enacting what they name only when one knows the work’s title. (Michael Fried might call this the thematization of the subject.)

A rectangular canvas, 15 1/2 by 29 inches, shows two parallel rows of 5-by-5-inch black squares, three across the upper half and four across the lower on a silver-enamel ground. The metallic surface and geometric format suggest the austerity of Minimalism, or at least the nostalgia for Minimalism invoked by neo-geo pictorial exercises, but this is a Rosen painting, and has an implicit puzzle. *Odd/Even*, 1990, is one of a new series in which the artist has replaced letters with square blocks, eliminating text. Another such work is titled *Feud*, and contains that word, but there is another black square between the *f* and the *e*, suggesting a missing letter and a famous name. Yet if this absence simultaneously teases Freud’s eminence as it produces recognition, the lowercase typography throughout signals diminished authority, and the word “feud”

lora reynolds gallery

engenders another reading: the ongoing quarrel surrounding its subject. In *Feud*, a fragment of a portrait, Rosen exhibits the wit, economy, and iconic manipulation that motivate a larger project of rerouting reading.

With this group of paintings, Rosen represents the pleasures of old-fashioned abstract Modernism at the same time that she questions its foundation of privilege. But she also turns from the puns of overt word play—shifting between semiotics and perception—to elegantly subdued reminders of the ongoing threats to free speech. At first glance, *Little Statuette* appears as a symmetrical cruciform pattern of black squares and diminutive crosses. That these slender crosses are t's, the only letters visible after the other letters of the title are blocked out, becomes apparent only when the title is read. In the top line of *Swallows Swords*, the "wallow" of "swallows" is blocked out, and below it black squares hide the two s's in "swords." We can use the stranded s's on the top line to fill in their absence in the lower, but we have already registered the chill effect of swallowing words, and also of sharp weapons down one's throat. And if the repeated black boxes suggest the TV game show *Wheel of Fortune*, itself based on the children's word game of hangman or hang the butcher, there is also a connotation of risk, of success or failure at stake.

It seems to me that *Odd/Even*, seemingly the mild-mannered painting of a mundane opposition, is actually unnervingly topical: it becomes ominous at a moment when the mechanics and insidious effects of censorship from right and left, odd and even, have been revealed to artists. But a more open-ended interpretation is also suggested, one that Kristeva identifies as the double articulation of artistic practice "through the inclusion of a 'subjective' signifying economy within an 'objective' ideological functioning. . . . a (subjective) signifying economy becomes an artistic signifying practice only to the extent that it is not articulated through the struggles of a given age."⁽⁹⁾ Disordering signifying systems such as grammar and rhetoric, Rosen lifts words from the inherent constraints of representation so that letters themselves become abstract symbols; private codes are public codes. Although there is a loss of a particular kind of meaning, a loss of verbal communication, there are other scenarios. In these cases, a surplus of meaning can occur; unspeakable and unthinkable until addressed by artists, these same elements can be given new forms and representations, they can still be visible and legible as abstraction and art.

A line is fed to gullible people but isn't always bought which means it is free which is something like a line fed to gullible fish who don't always bite which means they're not free but which in fact means they are, depending upon the point of view.

—Kay Rosen

Judith Russi Kirshner is director of the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

NOTES

1. Kay Rosen, *Lines on Lines*, artist's book, 1982, n.p.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1960, p. 167.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
4. Julia Kristeva, "Giotto's Joy," *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Leon S. Roudiez, ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 218.
5. Freud, p. 170.
6. Kristeva, "How Does One Speak to Literature?," *Desire in Language*, p. 106.
7. Kristeva, "Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini," *Desire in Language*, p. 243.
8. See Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 65.
9. Kristeva, "Giotto's Joy," p. 232.