



SIGNS

SIGNS

NED RIFKIN
GUEST CURATOR

GARY FALK

KEN FEINGOLD

MARIAN GALCZENSKI

JENNY HOLZER

JOHN KNIGHT

MANUAL

MATT MULLICAN

TAD SAVINAR

AL SOUZA

THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, NEW YORK



SIGNS

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	3
<i>Preface</i>	4
<i>Gary Falk</i>	6
<i>Ken Feingold</i>	8
<i>Marian Galczenski</i>	10
<i>Jenny Holzer</i>	12
<i>John Knight</i>	14
<i>MANUAL</i>	16
<i>Matt Mullican</i>	18
<i>Tad Savinar</i>	20
<i>Al Souza</i>	22
<i>Works in the Exhibition</i>	24

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In addition, I am grateful to several of my colleagues at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., for enabling me to complete the necessary work on this exhibition while commencing with my current position and its attendant responsibilities. I would especially like to thank Michael Botwinick, director, and Jane Livingston, associate director/chief curator, for their patience, cooperation, and timely counsel and Doug Shawn, curato-

rial assistant, for generally pitching in whenever and wherever required. Many thanks to the lenders to the exhibition: Dorothy Sahn; the Smorgon Family Collection of American Contemporary Art and its curator Marilyn Werner; A. James Speyer, curator of 20th century painting and sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago; Betty Moody of Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas; Richard Flood and Barbara Gladstone of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York; and Mary Boone and Susan Ingraham of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

Others instrumental in assisting me at times during the organizing of SIGNS are Michael Klein of Michael Klein, Inc.; Anne Rorimer; Susanne Ghez, director of the Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago; and Coosje van Bruggen.

Finally, I thank the artists whose work constitutes SIGNS. Their example has certainly been an inspiration to me during the past seven years. My hope is that this exhibition will serve as a testament to their perseverance and their vision.

N.R.

***You've been on this road before.
You can read the signs.
You can feel your way.
You can do this in your sleep.***

— Laurie Anderson, United States, Part IV —

This book of graphic projects is published in conjunction with and as an extension of SIGNS, an exhibition of the works of nine young American artists. (A checklist of works in the exhibition appears at the end of this book.) The works created for these pages attempt to interpret and assess the thematic overlay and the context of the exhibition. These particular artists were invited to participate based on my feeling that, for several years, their work has been creating a fundamentally new mode of art and an original way of responding to the world.

In 1978, when I first saw Al Souza's photoworks in Texas, I was fascinated by his various uses of road signs. He was examining a signage system which

was designed for specific places in order to initiate emphatically cautious behavior. The fact that we, as responsible citizens of the roads, are taught to understand and anticipate situations through the imposition of generic arrows, abstract phrases, and silhouetted images struck me as disarmingly simple yet ironically complex. Souza's work probes this pervasive, albeit somewhat invisible, feature of our roadside visual environment. The signs themselves were skillfully designed to be read at high speeds and to trigger important behavioral reactions. I became engrossed in the succinct purposefulness of these signs and soon discovered their intrinsically satisfying visual characteristics.

In New York, I discovered Matt Mullican's referencing of universal sign language, another system of generic designs frequently found in airports and other public spaces. His use of these signs belied the general function associated with this system of indication in order to attain an even grander goal—the articulation of the artist's world view and his system of cosmological beliefs. Populist functional design methods were fused with a spiritual, somewhat idiosyncratic need to order the universe. The fact that the artist was imposing a certain stylistic distance to speak directly to a deeply personal subject perplexed and intrigued me.

Despite the recent vogue for what

rapidly became known as "neoexpressionism," that predominantly discursive style of richly painted figurative distortions engineered to evoke primal scream reverberations in the viewer, some artists were seizing upon a more distant, intellectual approach to the same cultural syndromes that had generated this emotional expurgation. Rather than delving into their psyches, the SIGNS artists responded in kind, as it were, usually issuing a message, often a warning of sorts, which would be delivered in the same or a similar medium that the artists felt was creating the very condition they were critiquing.

There is a certain muteness, neutrality, and reluctance to signature common to all. Yet this work is not styleless. On the contrary, there is a distinctive look—that of the anonymous designer. The cool hand of the minimal art of the '60s and early '70s has resurfaced, now harnessed to a decidedly purposeful end. Historically, this work springs from the ironic and cynical distance that was characteristic of pop and the social and often programmatic inclinations of conceptual art, in addition to drawing upon the reductive tendencies of minimalism. Nevertheless, as with all art of our century, the measure of success is not simply resourcefulness, but rather the depth of the artist's synthesis and abil-

ity to yield greater insight into the world in which we live.

The artists included in SIGNS are involved with an ethical, perhaps even a moral art which reflects the difficulties of individuation in a society that increasingly stultifies uniqueness by relying on predesigned systems. The multiplicity of voices evident in Jenny Holzer's Truisms, the skewing of logotypes, corporate emblems, and architectural floor plans for museums in John Knight's work, the rigorous phenomenological bracketing of mundane objects through first the video screen and then the camera lens in MANUAL's Videology, the encoded reportage and oblique social commentary of Tad Savinar's painted wall works, the rebuslike enigma of Gary Falk's Messages to the Public and his large-scale pictographic enamel paintings on obdurate metal, Ken Feingold's alchemical index of signs painted behind glass which comprise his comprehensive philosophy, and Marian Galczenski's yearning to reinvent an alphabet employing an array of real symbols and invented hieroglyphics all reveal the artists' need to eschew the centuries old traditions of touch, gesture, and the hand in favor of a more generic sign.

We witness here a distinct preference for indication rather than demonstration. The process to which each of

the nine artists in this exhibition have, in varying degrees, subscribed involves taking a sign or sign system and, in effect, "de-signing" it by removing its initial reading or original function, thereby imparting new meaning and hence avoiding a "signature" style. In fact, the significant shift that has occurred during the past ten to fifteen years has been from a Greenbergian formal abstraction, one that is essentially literal, self-reflexive, and "art about art," toward an art that is primarily dealing with abstraction in an existential mode, addressing not the landscape, but rather how one moves through it. Signs are now placed in a new context as "things in the world." Although in the past they functioned as anonymous behavioral imperatives, they are now invested with an aesthetic impetus which avoids the intrusion of the artist's ego or his or her craving for celebrity. The modesty in this work speaks quite clearly to the priority given to authority of content over the cult of authorship.

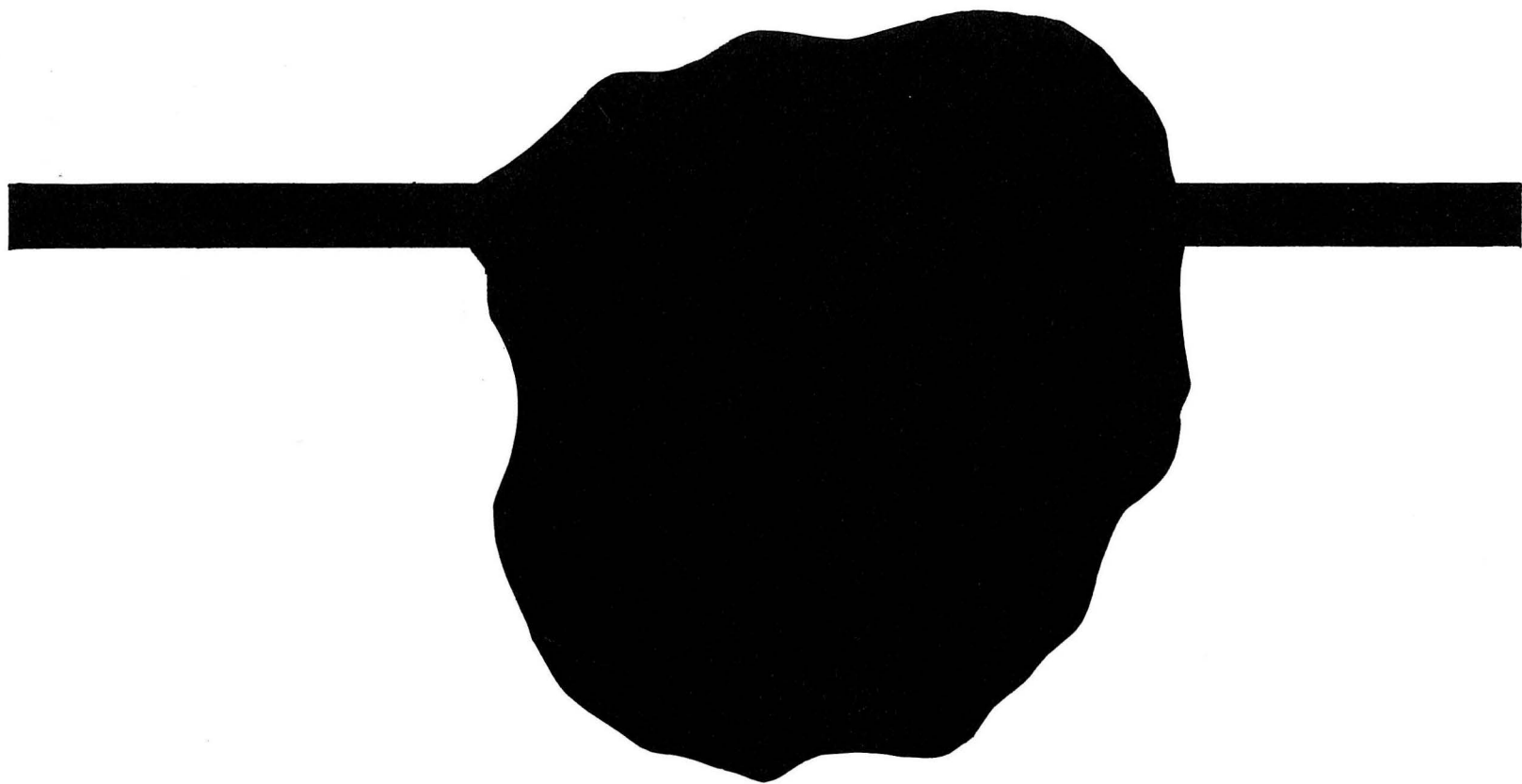
It appears that these artists have taken Laurie Anderson quite literally when, in her epic performance piece United States (1979-83), she paraphrases Ludwig Wittgenstein by saying, "If you can't talk about it, point to it." For these nine artists, SIGNS is precisely this point.

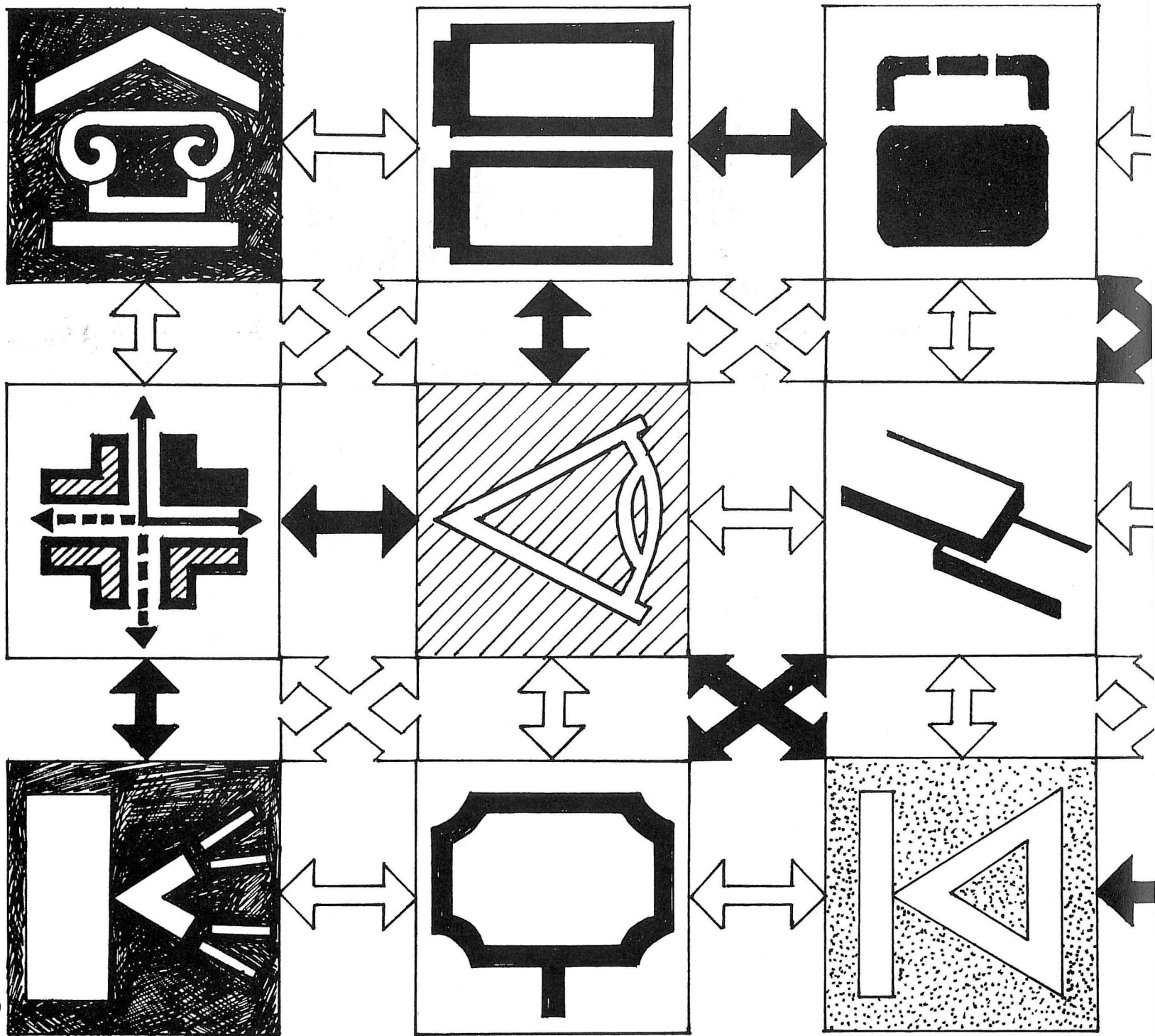
Ned Rifkin

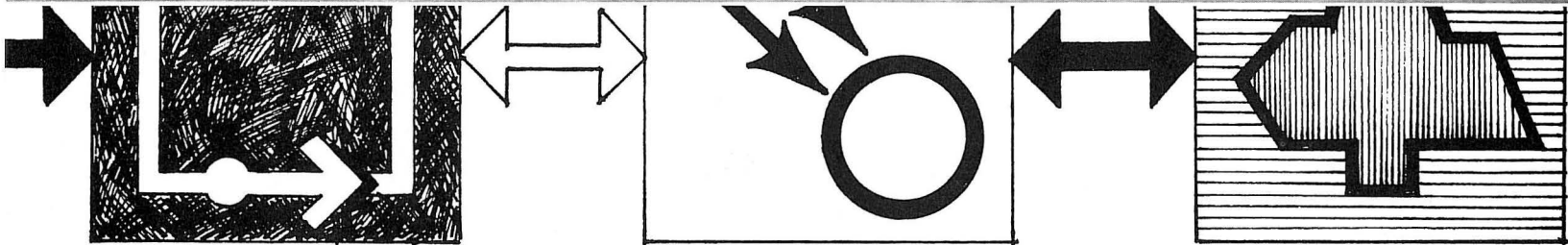
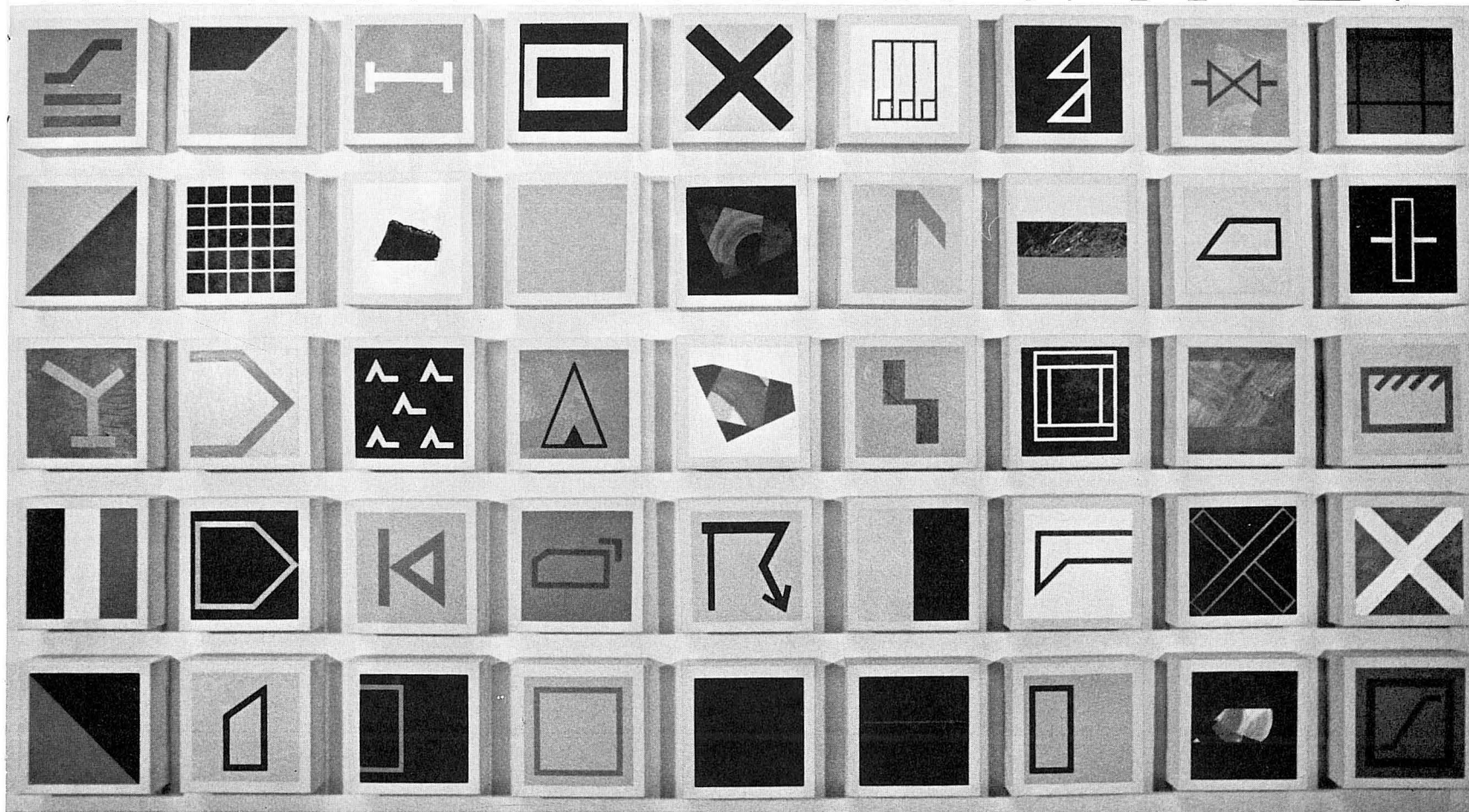
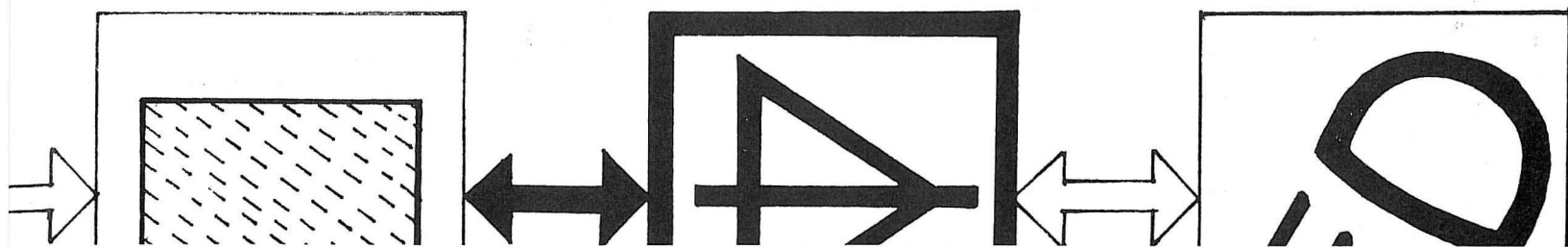












**YOU CAN'T R
PEOPLE WHO
YOU AT WILL,
HAVE TO GO
THINK ABOUT**

**TEACH THE
CAN KILL
SO YOU
HOME AND
WHAT TO DO.**

26 March 85

John Knight
1304 North Riviera
Venice, CA 90291

Dear John,

I should begin by saying that I don't think I have ever written a letter quite like this one before. Not simply is it a "Dear John" letter, but rather it is emphatically for you and thus private and direct. On the other hand, knowing that this will be printed in the "artists' book" publication that will accompany the SIGNS exhibition opening at The New Museum in exactly one month, it is also decidedly public and what I call remembering to forget something. In other words, it is an exercise in self-expression deliberately staged in the unrelenting self-consciousness of a public arena. In this sense, I already have gained greater empathy for the enterprise of making art in the studio for eventual public exposure.

At this juncture, it is probably worth reiterating what has transpired up to now in order to be as clear as possible. In February, I decided to use what resources were available for a catalogue to attempt something a bit out of the ordinary. I thought that rather than have a standard catalogue with the curator's essay verbally interpreting the participating artists' work and providing a thematic context for the exhibition, I would invite the nine of you to each design a graphic piece for the printed page which would act as an extension of the exhibition, as well as giving you the chance to interpret the context in which your work would appear. I had spent considerable time with each of you exchanging ideas and discussing the exhibition--how it evolved, why it was significant for me, who would be in it. I felt that everyone in the show had a sense of why they belonged in it and what motivated me, as curator, to organize this particular exhibition. So I wanted to offer you an opportunity to address that context and, if possible, for each to offer an assessment or interpretation in whatever medium or manner you deemed appropriate. My suggestion was to use the printed page as a space for site-specific projects which would allow each person a chance to make art for the book which will inevitably outlast the actual exhibition. In this way, the catalogue could be invested with a genuine aesthetic value rather than merely contain facsimiles of art. In this respect, I thought that your work, collectively as an exhibition, would necessarily stand on its own better. Though I felt quite good about the entire undertaking, I confess that I was still a little disappointed, perhaps even somewhat horrified, that I would not be articulating my ideas to stand along side your works. In thinking about critics who might be writing on the show before I even had aired it out myself, I felt a degree of frustration.

In any case, I expected that you might take this occasion to deal directly with museums and contextualization since your piece in SIGNS is an excerpt from *Museotypes*, sixty bone china plates, each bearing a different floor plan silkscreened in its center.

Despite the fact that you had asked me to forward you the elevation and floor plan of The New Museum's space on Broadway, and knowing that you teach in a school of architecture and that you are deeply rooted in architecture as significant contextual/spatial index, I cannot say that I was entirely surprised when Marcia Landsman called me in Washington last week to tell me that, for your piece in the publication, you wanted me to elaborate on the original notion I had expressed in my letter to the artists discussing the idea of the book extending the exhibition and interpreting the thematic overlay I was imposing on your work.

I immediately thought about your recent experience with your exhibition and catalogue at L.A.I.C.A. and the fact that they adopted your ascribed motto, "When the Conversation Turns to Art," for their actual letterhead. I was reminded of Picasso's appropriation and interpretation of Duchamp's radical concept of the "readymade" when he made his famous Bull's Head out of a bicycle seat and handle bars. He is said to have commented that the piece would only be completed when the bull's head was dismantled and returned to the bicycle from which it came. Of course, Picasso being the masterful materialist that he was, deliberately defused the contextual contrast he suggested rather facetiously by casting the piece in bronze, thus reducing the efficacy of the thing as a primary object and forever preventing its solution, so to speak, by freezing it in the stuff of high art and thereby abjuring the index of authenticity of the found objects. I make this digression because I sensed that you would be in the position analogous to Duchamp's. By paying you for your motto and permanently printing it atop their stationery, L.A.I.C.A. effectively subverted your own strategic undermining and reversed the context on you as an artist. One could argue that they simply carried the piece further into the domain of reality from that of art, but after speaking with you about the situation, I perceived the former.

Your asking me to elaborate within your pages sets up some interesting problems. To begin with, it points to your insistent and rigorous aesthetics of context that you, as artist, must maintain and manipulate, however slight that adjustment might be. Since, as curator, I asked you to interpret the context of the exhibition, your act of interpretation is to reverse fields, to invoke a cinematic term. By analogy, you have rotated the camera 180° on axis so that what was previously behind it and visually inaccessible is now before it and thereby made visible.

When I accepted your invitation six days ago on the telephone, I began to get a sick feeling predominantly informed by the same self-consciousness I referred to at the outset of this letter. I realized that I was now in the role of artist--a reasonably complex issue for me personally. (More on that another time.) I thought of deploying one of my several word plays; something like "CON TEXT :: ON NEXT." Then I recalled your admonition about not doing "Corn-ceptual" art. I froze.

I thought more about the aesthetic process as a symbiotic relationship between artist and viewer, transmitter and receiver. The artist is the one who sends the signal, while the viewer needs to be prepared and active in order to creatively receive and thereby enhance this transmission. I wondered about my role now, in this context, as a sender and initiator. I knew that I was good at responding and interpreting, but rather startled to be considering the blank pages and my responsibility to send. Then I began thinking about the exhibition and the thesis presented.

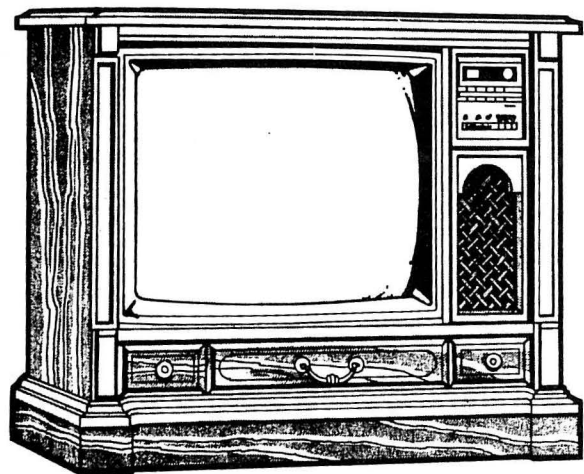
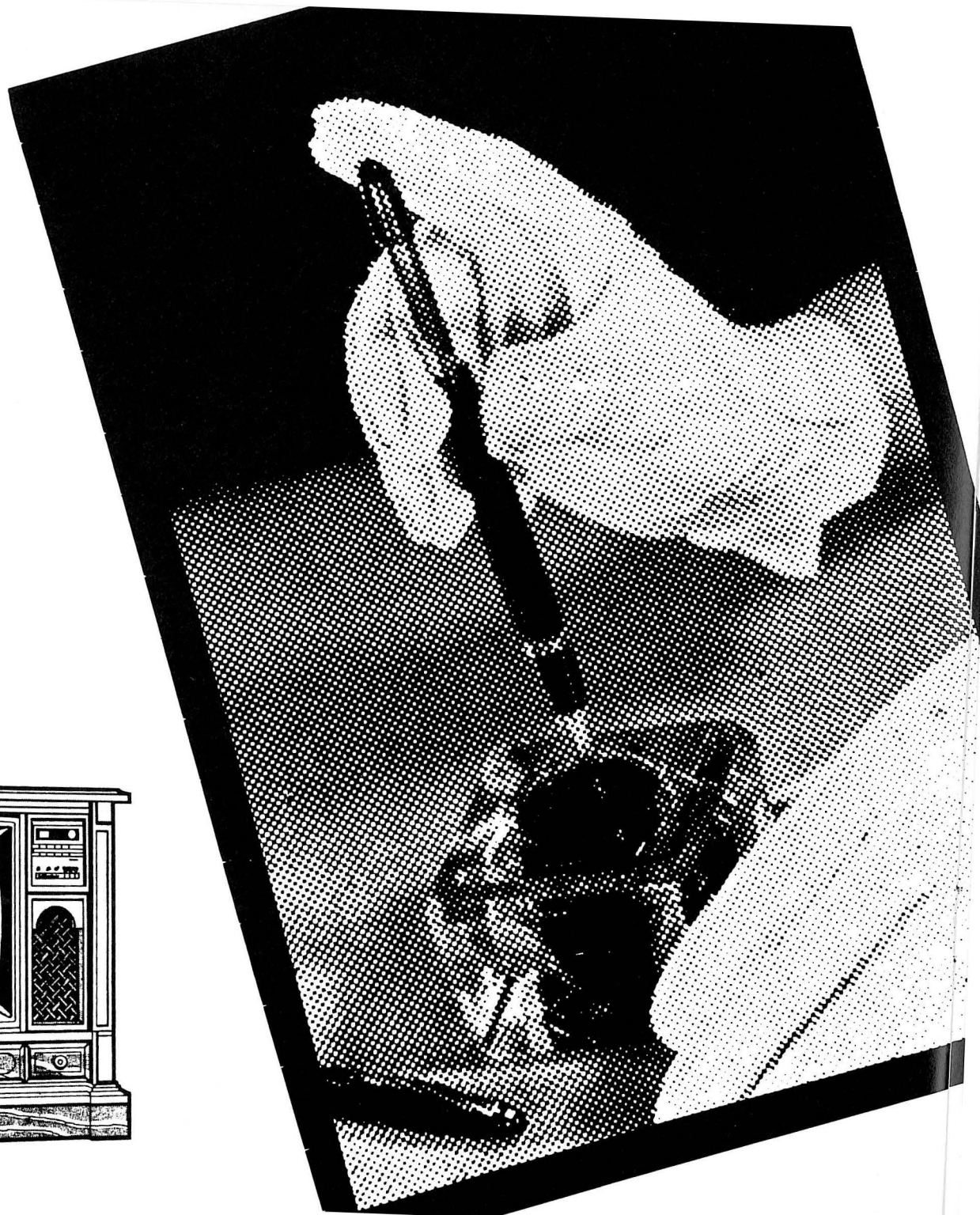
My notion of the work in this show taking pre-existent signs or sign systems (in your case the floor plans of museums, those containers of objects iconic to art) and witnessing the "de-signing" of those signs, i.e., the removal of the conventional meaning or function, is critical to the concept of the show. On the other hand, what we are dealing with here is another step beyond that. You are really "re-signing" (or perhaps "resigning" your space) by skewing the context. What becomes important to me about this publication and the process you have deflected back to me is that the "re-signing" is also in the form of an "assignment." The assignment of meaning has been bounced back and forth by us in an attempt to bracket it and thereby get a handle on it. I think immediately of that curious writing on the passenger's side view mirror of newer cars that tell the driver "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear." The further away the other cars appear, the easier it is to determine the appropriate action. I suppose that this involves a form of intellectual, rather than visual, perspective. The paradoxical trade-off here of course, is that the further from the sign and its initial reading, the richer its meaning can become.

I am certain that I could continue writing this letter for a good while longer, but the truth is that I have said most of what I had in mind, at least at this moment. I now confront the anxiety of seeing these informal, unrehearsed words appear in print. This form of writing is obviously closer to talking, and to that degree, more akin to the way I think. Perhaps what you have allowed me to do is to skew my own formal, academically acquired manner of writing about art which appears in the Preface. Thanks for the opportunity to unravel some of this stuff. I hope it makes some sense and will allow somebody greater insight into what goes on in the process of contextualizing art for public consumption.

I am still quite excited about mounting our show. I look forward to seeing you in New York in a month and to meeting Pumiko. I hope this letter finds you in good spirits and health.

EMIT TIME,

Ned



FIVE TENETS FOR AN EMPTY HOUSE

He chooses all his words with great care, having made an elaborate FETISH of calculated language.

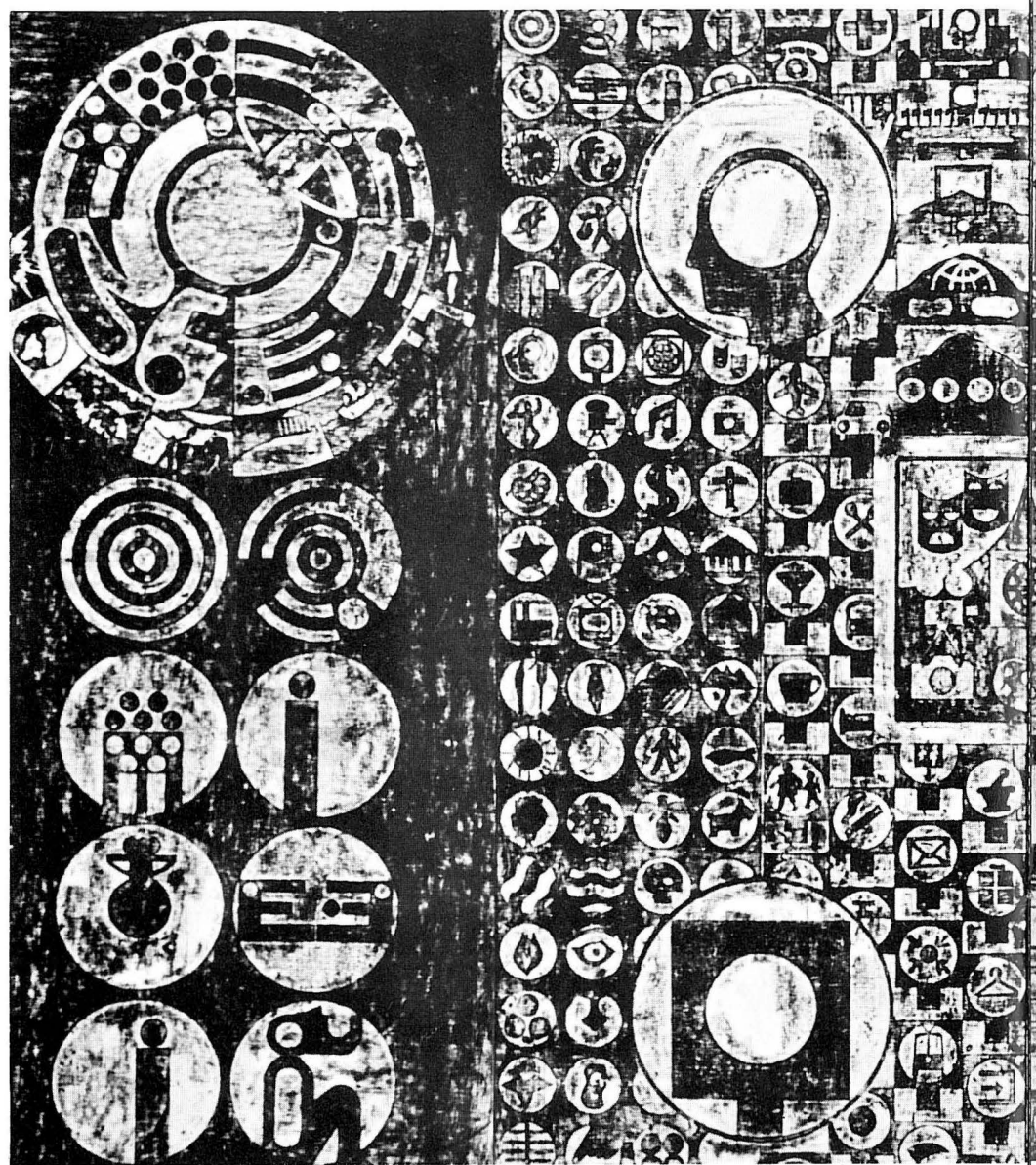
She has long abandoned hope of determining right from wrong MEANING while still clinging to a formalized pantomime of this anachronistic practice.

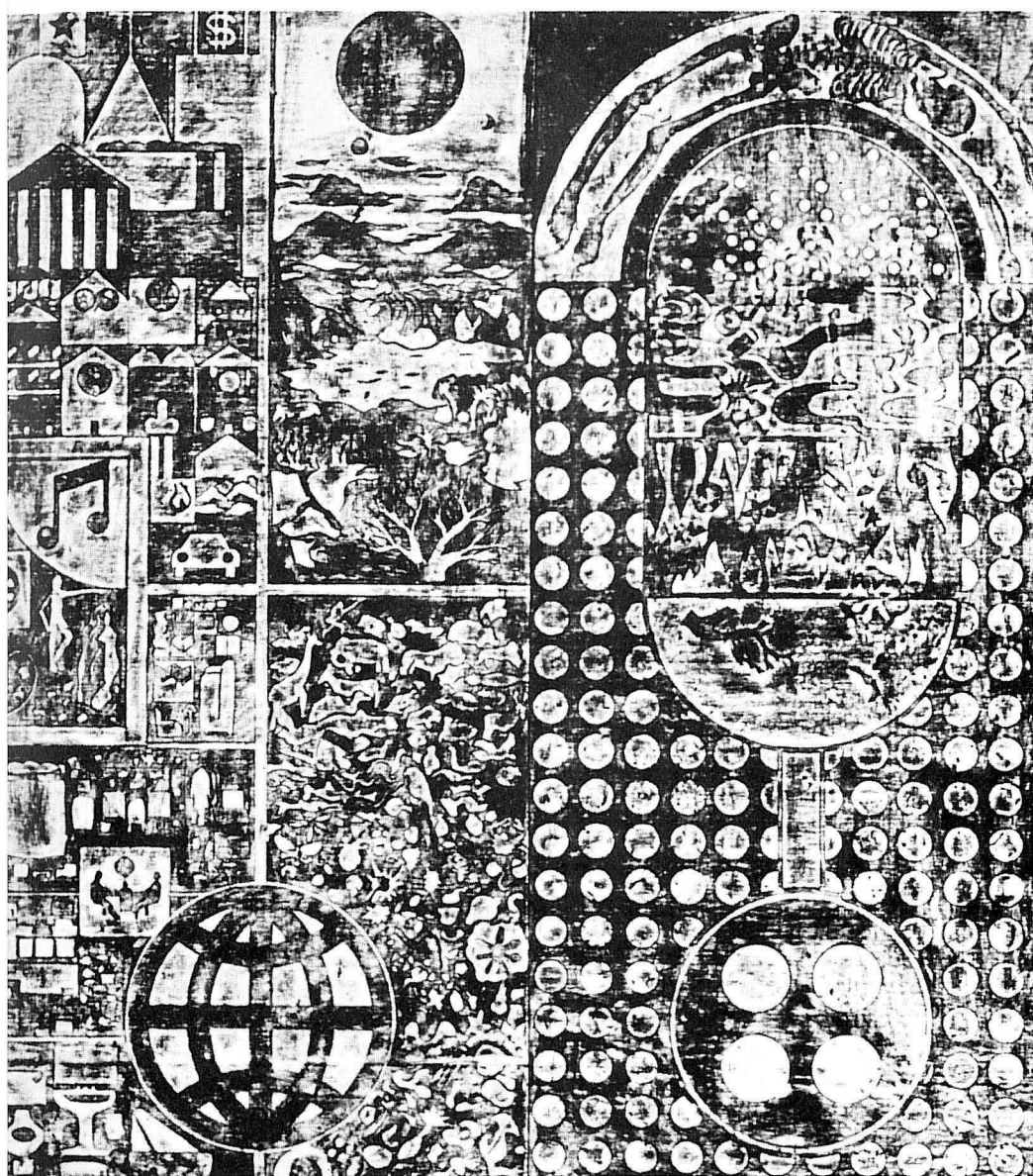
He has achieved a certain ambivalent fascination toward DESIRE that comes from working at the cutting edge of cliché.

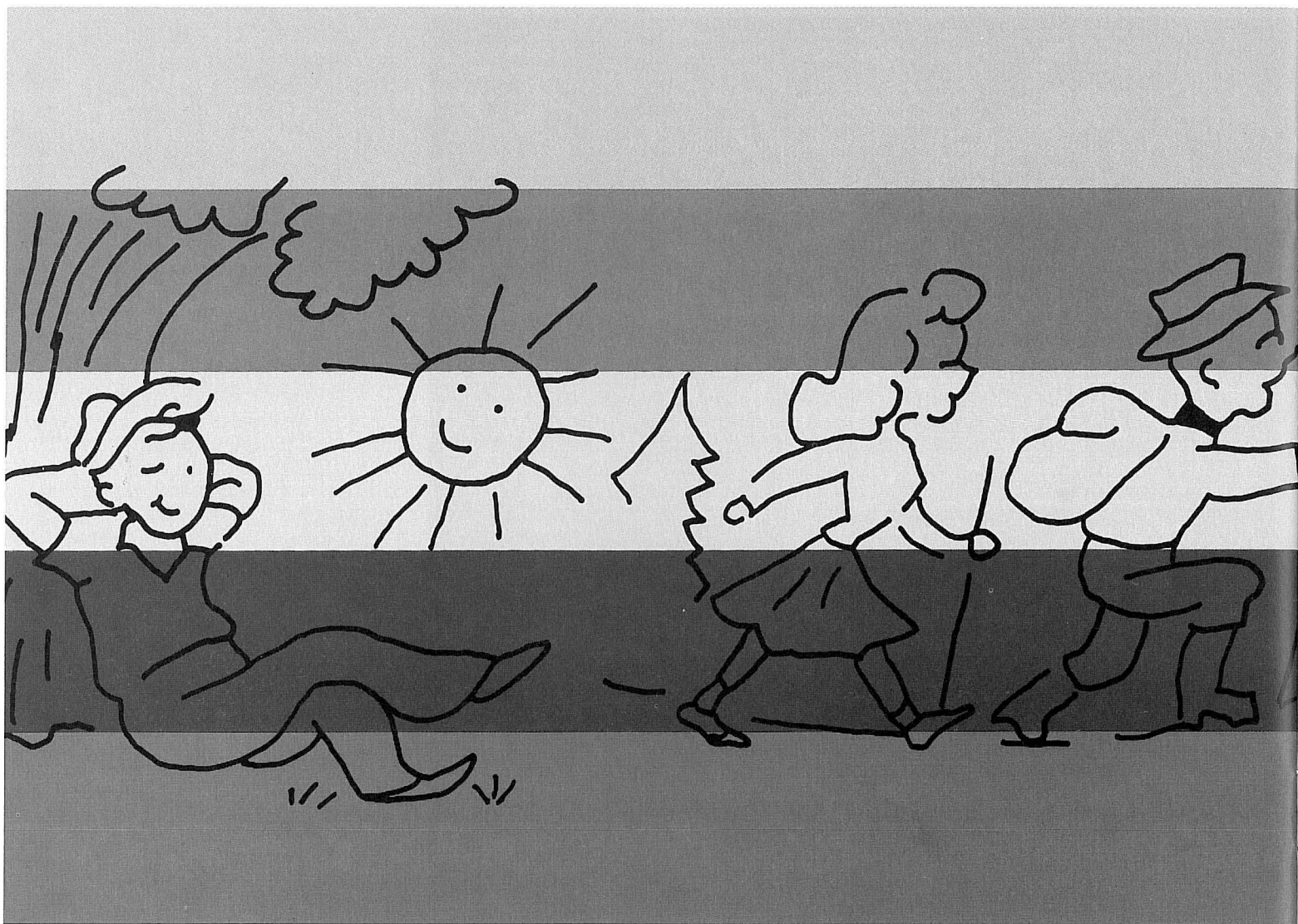
The task, as she sees it, is to track the pathology of the cultural SIGN and even, at times, to meddle with its itinerary.

They have observed that every sign has its ALIBI.

MANUAL (Suzanne Bloom & Ed Hill), 1985

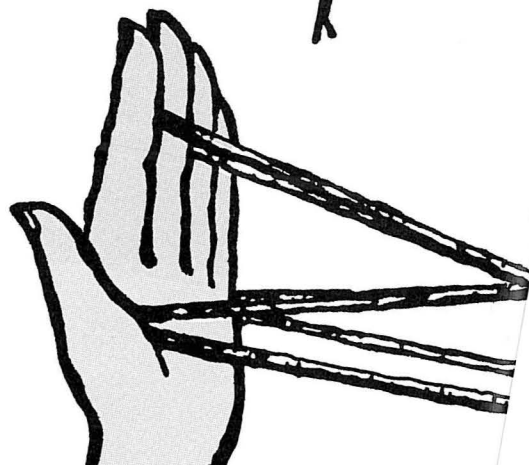


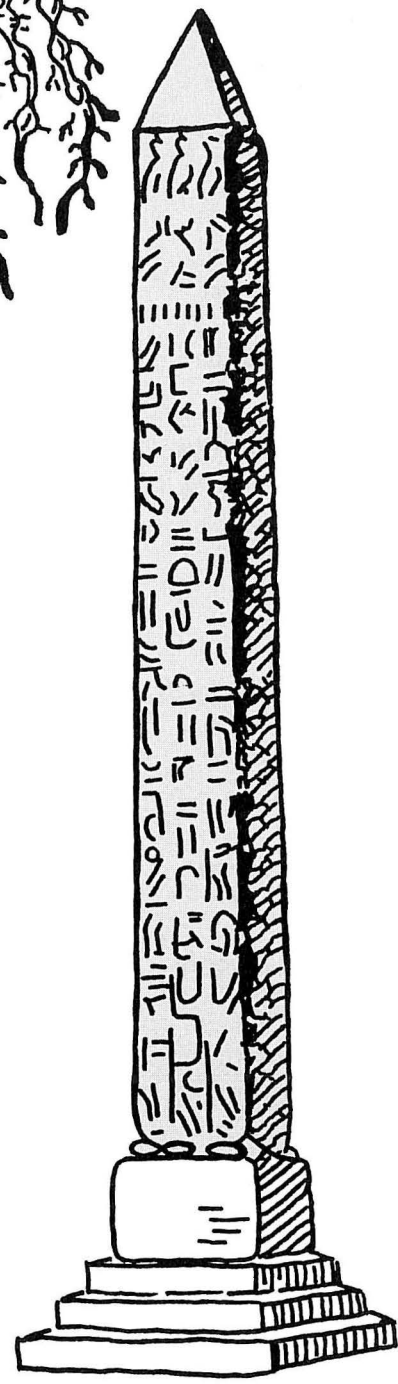
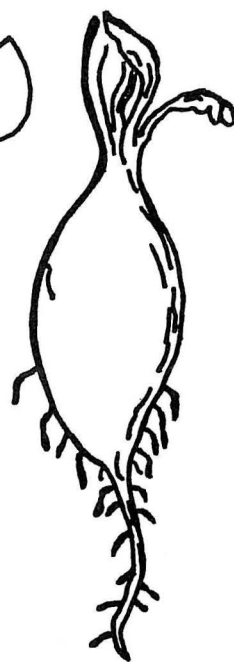
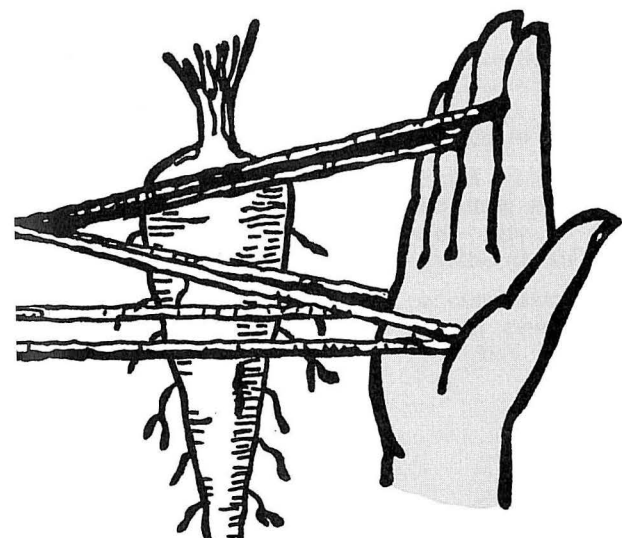
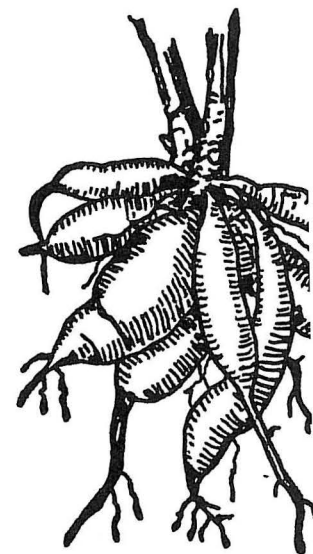
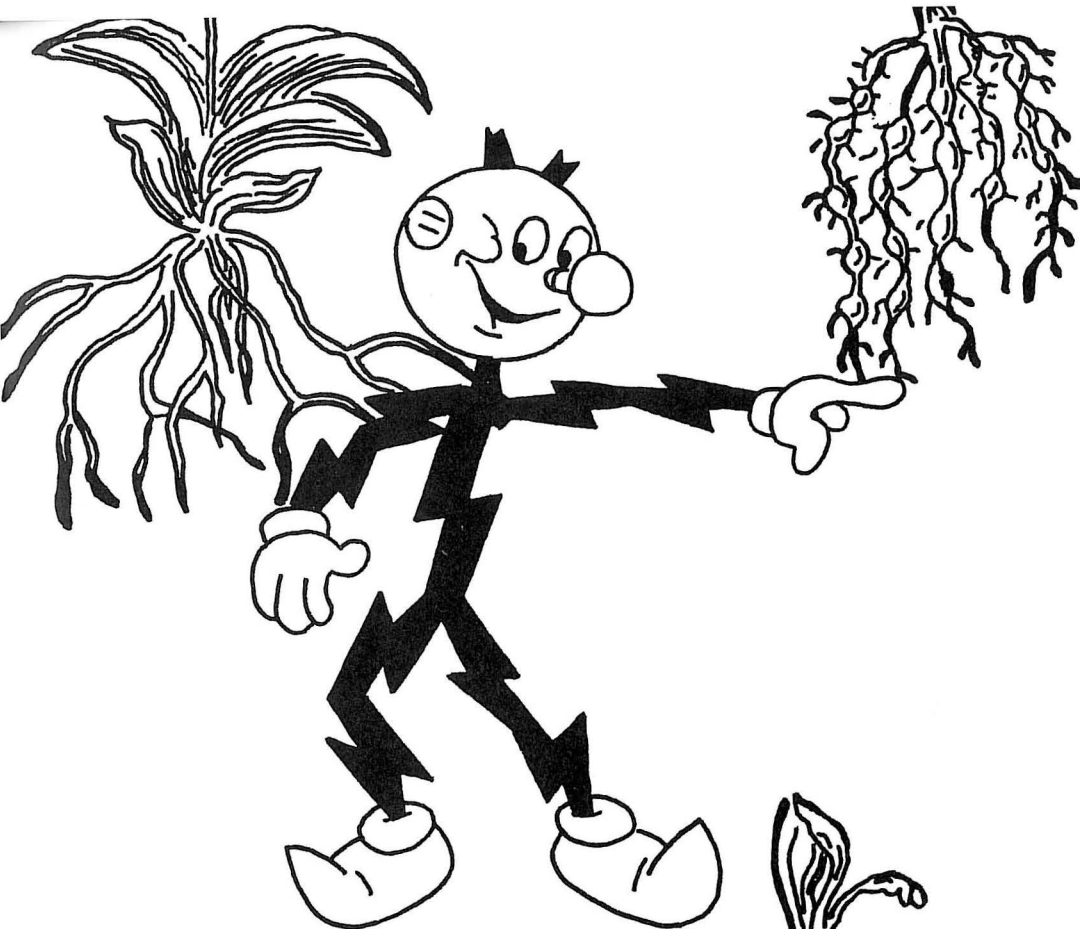




THE

CURE





WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Height precedes width precedes depth
All works are courtesy the artist unless
otherwise indicated.

GARY FALK

Bombshell, 1983, enamel and acrylic on aluminum, 48 x 216"

Red Desert, 1984, enamel and acrylic on steel, 84 x 120"

Messages to the Public, 1983, ¾" color videotape, 60 seconds, courtesy The Public Art Fund, New York

KEN FEINGOLD

Signs 1-15, 1980-1984, mixed media, dimensions variable

MARIAN GALCZENSKI

Alphabet, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 45 units: 72 x 132 x 3½"; each 12 x 12 x 3½"

JENNY HOLZER

From *The Living Series*

Untitled, 1981 (More than once...), bronze plaque, 7½ x 10"; edition 3/3, courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1981 (It's an odd feeling...), bronze plaque, 7 x 10"; edition 2/3, courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1981 (You can make yourself...), bronze plaque, 7 x 10"; edition 1/3, courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1981 (More people will be building...), enamel plaque, 21 x 23", courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1981 (You have to make thousands...), plastic plaque, 22 x 23", courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

From *The Survival Series*

Untitled, 1981 (With all the holes...), silkscreen on metal, 24 x 24", courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1983 (Hide underwater...), aluminum plaque, 6 x 10", courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1983 (You are trapped...), aluminum plaque, 3 x 10", courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1983 (Finding extreme pleasure...), aluminum plaque, 6 x 10", courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Selections from *Truisms*, 1983, moving message unit, LED sign, red/green diode, 5½ x 60 x 6", The Smorgon Family Collection of American Contemporary Art, New York

JOHN KNIGHT

Selections from *Museotypes*, 1983, bone china, 24 of 60 units: each 9½" in diameter, collection The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois

MANUAL

Excerpts from *Videology*, 1984, thirty color photographs: each 20 x 24", ¾" color videotape ("The Time of Our Signs"), 10 minutes, 30 seconds, courtesy the artists and Moody Gallery, Houston

MATT MULLICAN

Untitled (Element), 1982, cotton appliqué on cotton, 96 x 96", collection The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; gift of The Women's Committee

Untitled (Subjective Sign, World Framed, World Unframed, Elemental), 1982, stained glass, 31 x 17¼ x 6¾", courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1984, oil stick on paper, 109 x 59", courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1984, etched stone, 60 x 60", courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York

Untitled (Mullican Posters), 1984, tempera on paper, set of 12: each 62 x 43½", courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York

TAD SAVINAR

Champ, 1982, latex paint on wall, 120 x 186"

Pursuit, 1982, paint on wall and wood, 108 x 101"

AL SOUZA

Death, 1975, ten color photographs in a wood and glass frame, 25½ x 27½", courtesy the artist and Moody Gallery, Houston

Hunger, 1975, eighteen color photographs in a wood and glass frame, 25½ x 30½", courtesy the artist and Moody Gallery, Houston

Light, 1975, ten color photographs in a wood and glass frame, 22½ x 28", courtesy the artist and Moody Gallery, Houston

Missing Road Signs, 1978, nine cut color photographs and scale signs in a wood and plexiglass box, 20¼ x 24¼ x 1¼", courtesy the artist and Moody Gallery, Houston

Billboards, 1981, eight color photographs and mixed media in a wood and plexiglass box, 23¼ x 51¾ x 1¾", courtesy the artist and Moody Gallery, Houston

Austrian Mirrors, 1981-1982, mixed media, three parts: left—26 x 29½", center—15 x 16", right—15 x 16", courtesy the artist and Moody Gallery, Houston

Small American Painting, 1981-1982, oil on canvas, 18 x 36", collection Dorothy Sahn, New York

