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“On Noise: Synesthesia
In Christopher Michlig’s Work.”

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Christopher Michlig
White Noise



Essay

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On Noise: Synesthesia in
Christopher Michlig's Work

The first time I looked at a Michlig Collage, I found myself hearing it. The fragments of text were totally abstract, but regardless, somehow my brain tried to make sense of the words. The ghosts of those words were clearly still there, the original blueprint of the poster hissing in the background. In all of Michlig's work, the underlying typography is jumbled into a new language that has involuntary effects on the way we process information in the brain. It's almost as if the fragments of meaning have a sound, like static white noise or interference. Of course, his work is all about interference, as the "noise" in the work is the result of disrupting the "space" of the posters. The initial removal of the linguistic content is the first alteration, resulting in a strict formalizing of what are otherwise very informal objects - informal in their layout, use of typography and placement throughout the city. The cutting away of this space in a sense organizes the space concretely.

The newly constructed posters create a contested space - a space that is at once haptic and optic - and maybe in this sense, synesthetic. Haptic as a result of the process of cutting, re-cutting, gluing, smudging and scuffing. Optic as a result of the frenetic visual effect of the final collage.

The "synesthetic" experience happens on a material/visual level and is the involuntary oscillation between what was there and what is there. A monochromatic space is a tessellated space and vice-versa. That oscillation between what is there and what was there is constantly at play. There is an interchange between past and present, occurring in an entirely new and fictional place.

The treatment of language in Michlig's work is a similar scenario. Language is extremely difficult to dismantle completely. Every part of typographic anatomy is specific and reminiscent of the original form, even at its most dismembered. The final presentation references language, while denying it its ability to communicate fully or clearly. All of Michlig's projects have, in one way or another, made an attempt to mitigate the ability of language to communicate clearly/fully. As a result, the synesthetic experience is an incited one - the experience of looking at a "negation" collage, for example, is intended to insinuate a linguistic potential - indexing meaning or understanding without being able to achieve it.

Michlig is interested in looking at the posters in the context of social space - stripping away the politics of language and focusing instead on its aesthetic qualities. He sees his process of attacking language as an almost militant activity, spending hours in the studio literally mutilating and cutting language apart, sometimes to the point of complete annihilation and destruction or "Black Out".

In this way, Michlig could be seen as an enemy of language. The actions of negating text and suppressing language are a comment on language and its often overpowering, declarative qualities. Through the cultivation of a punk rock aesthetic and intentional misuse of words, there is an anti-authoritarian/political drive behind the work. Michlig is also interested in liberating the posters from their job as merchant advertising tools. And let's face it; they don't have an easy job. In loud, obnoxious neon colors they scream at passers by, begging to be noticed. Michlig is interested in quieting the screaming and proposing a different sound, uncolored by punctuation - a new ground where we can communicate in space with dynamic forms, not just language.

Inspired by the Russian constructivist notion that a form can be urgent, ecstatic and socially significant, Michlig has also resuscitated original constructivist kiosk designs by Gustav Klutis from their retired historical context. While the political content may be expired, the dynamic forms are still important in their own right. The formal qualities maintain their relevance. Michlig sees this aspect of his practice as an intergenerational collaboration.

As Michlig explains, "Accompanying the collages are sculptures that deconstruct public communication formats such as kiosks and street-signs. Redacted panels atop vigorous supports, toppled signposts, jumbled letterforms, and crumpled paper bases lay bare the potential of these forms to shift from being static objects in urban space, to dynamic forms that construe and represent urban space. My immediate urban experience of Los Angeles, as well as historical precedents such as Constructivist agit-prop and the significant visual output generated in tandem with the May 1968 student revolt in Paris, my practice is concerned not only with specific local urbanisms, but urban space in general."

Michlig's work is firmly embedded in the visual and social architecture of Los Angeles. His source material is merchant posters printed by The Colby Poster Printing Company, a company founded in downtown LA in 1946. It has been used by many artists living and working in the city including Ed Ruscha and Mark Bradford and is currently being used to brand the first "Made in LA" Biennial, organized by the Hammer Museum in collaboration with LAXART. These posters continue to be a distinct Los Angeles visual, whose five fluorescent colors, punctuate the built environment.

City Plan is an interesting work to look at in this context. Made to look like an architectural proposal on a trestle table, this three-dimensional poster collage literally reflects the built environment of the city through a direct relationship to font size. That is to say, the density of text in the posters correlates directly to the density of the built environment. More urban areas tend to pack more text into a poster, using every inch of the page for information and varying font sizes. More suburban areas tend to employ larger text and fewer words, with little to no use of punctuation. The use of text reflects the social and urban landscape of the city - small buildings next to large high rises and single-family homes surrounded by generous areas of land. The posters clearly illustrate that there is a definitive cultural and socio-economic difference in the way that language occupies space.

With Michlig's most recent work, there has been a clear move away from the forms being solely derived from the original poster and towards pure abstraction. For his solo show, White Noise, Michlig is engaging the notion of urban fabric as a connotative starting point, to make geometric collages based on a variety of references including city traffic and textiles. Making exclusive use of the bare, unprinted edges of merchant posters and discarding typographic and "design" content entirely, these works reinforce the distinction between the life of the city (people, groups, language) and the material form of the city (buildings, streets, objects). Insofar as the original posters might be considered a part of the city, at once social and material, Michlig in turn can be thought of as using the posters (and the city itself) as a raw material. Furthermore, the posters are constantly denied their primary function; the language surgically removed and the resulting empty space becoming a potential space for aesthetic activity.

A Michlig collage proposes a new landscape - new possibilities. There is an underlying architecture that has been disrupted and rebuilt, re-ordered and re-routed. Much like a map or a piece of music, there is the creation of a new blueprint built upon another - a new structure erected on old territory, a new vernacular. A Michlig collage sings, concurrently honoring and negating the past - and subsuming it, sometimes violently, with a new melody.