THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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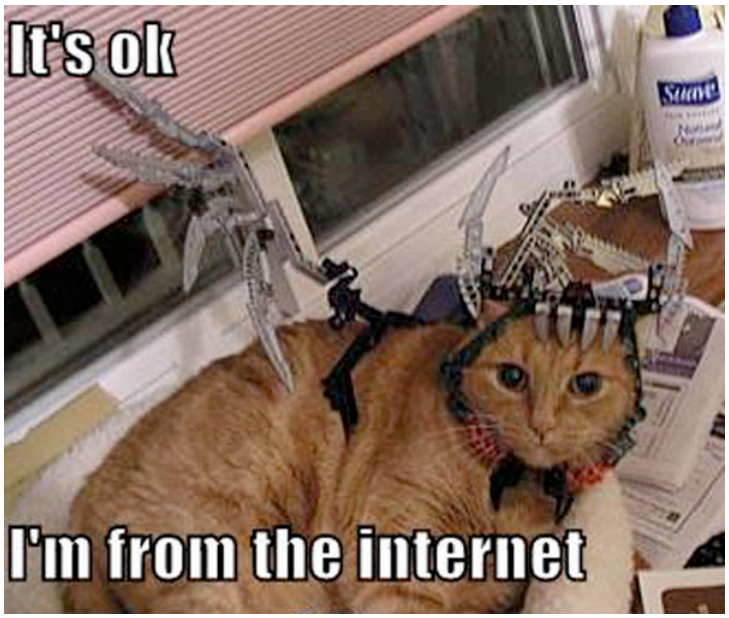
ARTSEEN

DAVID SHRIGLEY: *Signs*

by Noah Dillon



"It's ok/I'm from the internet" (2008) by "Sarah." Dimensions variable. Digital photograph, dimensions variable. icanhascheezburger.com.

David Shrigley's recent show at Anton Kern, *Signs*, relied heavily on language, making pictures out of words or using images as substrates on which text was written. Words were on placards, on cat-shaped canvases, on a bronze gong. Cast sculptures proclaimed: "WORDS," "CLOCKS," or "ORNAMENTS," on four of the gallery's walls, while in a separate room, Christopher Wool-like linocut texts hung framed on the walls.

Shrigley treats pictures and words as equals, underscoring the recognition that everything has the potential for signification. His work isn't high-minded, but it's honest and unpretentious. To see text as image can be odd or confusing, but Shrigley's darkly humorous amalgam is direct and clear.

The cats in Shrigley's exhibition are zoomorphic signs scrawled with short, agitating phrases. Painted in acrylic on pillow-like stuffed canvases, each piece was set on a

short pedestal that called attention to its sculptural-pictorial confusion. Dimensionality was undercut by the work's placement against a wall, while the painted components were confounded by their construction and low placement. Some are pitch-perfect. In "Cats (It's OK, It's Not OK)" 2012, chiral felines sit side-by-side, one assuring, "IT'S OK," the other, "IT'S NOT OK." Other cats, with messages such as "ENJOY YOUR HELL" or "KISS MY ASS," exude too much pathos to communicate much else.

"Untitled." ASCII rendition of Sir John Tenniel's Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland. Artist and date unknown. Dimensions variable. Courtesy gamecatandtheglitch.wordpress.com/

The language of the "OK" cats activates them, making each cat into a character rather than a screed. It allows us to enter into a dialogue with the cats, and sets the cats into dialogue with each other. Neither animal makes clear who is being addressed or what is or isn't OK. The phrases give them personae and provide a narrative. Without the text, the cats would be boring sculptures; without cats, the text would simply be a pair of contrary statements.

Shrigley's work is greatest when it has to be read to be seen and seen to be read. This, I think, might be a useful analogue to the way text and image function in the Internet era: The Web is a visual medium made with text. At their best, those two elements aren't in competition but conjunction. In the art we see, the things we read, words and images work together to provoke and inform one another.

Since the dawn of civilization language has been a mixture of pictures and letters. Mixing, matching, or conflating these signs can powerfully reinforce, undermine, or tweak one's message. Artists as varied as Francis Picabia, Ed Ruscha, Mark Lombardi, and others, have utilized this to great effect in their own work. An air of presumed authority can arise from one's use of pictures or words and the Internet has only exacerbated this problem. Because they're efficacious—because they can instantiate things—the assertions of news reports, press releases, photos, and sculptures claim our deference. The Web allows people to obtain, manipulate, create, and distribute text and pictures almost for free. That encourages everyone to be untrained aggregators and engineers of powerful signs—the sort of thing artists do especially. It also means that there are a lot of undeservingly authoritative images and rhetoric around and that there's incredible allowance for more.

We should bear in mind that the Internet we use today is really only about a decade old and that in its infancy 50 years ago, text and image were wholly entangled. ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) art, which uses typographic signs to create pictures, emerged in the late 1960s from R&D labs (primarily those of Bell Telephone). ASCII designs, programmed or written by hand, were far more elaborate than the :) emoticons of the 21st century.

Even as photography and video have eclipsed ASCII over the past two decades, cyberspace has remained perversely textual. That's changing. Google now provides picture-based queries on their images.google.com site. Drag and drop a picture from your desktop into the search bar and see what happens—it's like magic. Google's also been working to make many of the world's museums visually accessible online, via the

Google Art Project. Using that product, one can examine, in stunning detail, works from the Met, San Francisco's MoMA, Tate Britain, and more than 180 other museums.

However, if communication's technologies have made art, its concomitant texts, and its institutions more available, a contemporaneous textual trend has also made those foci less open. Consider any contemporary art that draws too heavily upon academic philosophy, hermetically sealing off the conversations of the "art world" from those who haven't done the required reading. Confusing references to arcane resources can be off-putting and distancing, which supports the notion that artists don't always know best what they're doing. If they or their press releases employ philosophic jargon as a means of explicating their efforts, they're likely wrong. Their wrongness, and our deference to authoritatively wielded media, risks hobbling the most powerful thing art does.

David Shrigley, "Cats (It's OK, It's Not OK)," 2012. Acrylic on canvas stuffed with foam. 17 1/2 × 10 1/2 × 4 1/2". Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

Art is capable of revealing our world, both through what the artist portrays intentionally and what they divulge by accident. For example, LOLcats are goofy cat comics that any Internet user is capable of making. As a few scholars are beginning to show, LOLcats can be trifling memes *and* repositories of our cultural assumptions—about cats, about

jokes, about the Internet, language, identity, the virality of ideas, and so on. As with Shrigley's cats, they deny the preeminence of either words or images. We understand LOLcats because the interdependency of their texts and images, which elicits a culturally meaningful sign. Whether in the era of the Internet or any other, whether writing in art or about art, whether Shrigley's cats or LOLcats, any medium available gives us only an image of ourselves in return.

David Shrigley: Signs
Anton Kern
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