Vernon Fisher WORKS

June 22—October 10, 1988

In HIRSCHHORN WORKS—a special exhibition program—invited artists choose a site in the building or on the grounds to create a temporary work of art. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden believes that having artists work on site, using the museum as both studio and medium, will give visitors a better understanding of the museum.

Vernon Fisher grew up outside of Fort Worth, Texas, and has lived and worked in that area for most of his life. His paintings and mixed media assemblages have, for more than ten years, usually incorpo-
rated language—from single words to brief stories—as well as a wide range of objects and images.

Ned Rifkin, Chief Curator for Exhibitions

NR: What function do you believe language serves in your work?
VF: Most recently, I have been using texts to control and put into context an accumulation of disparate images. Even unrelated images seem to fold into line when accompanied by a text. Everything seems to create a kind of narrative unity, to become part of the same story, perhaps because when image and text are juxtaposed, ordinarily one is in the service of the other—a diagram illustrating an idea or a caption explaining a photograph, for example. Whatever the reason, I think reading the ELF text (see below) I use in the Hirshhorn WORKS piece gives the associated visual images significant new layers of meaning.

Across the upper peninsula of Michigan spirals an under-ground antenna a thousand miles long. This antenna, be-cause of its tremendous length, generates radio signals of extremely low-frequency (ELF). Unlike ordinary waves, these signals migrate through the earth’s crust and can be detected by submarines running at operating depth—enabling the Navy to communicate with its Trident submarines without their having to risk detection by surfacing. For this reason, the Navy considers ELF essential to its nuclear strategy.

The system, unfortunately, is not without problems. The most serious concern is with the quality of the signal itself, which even the Navy concedes is “exceptionally subtle.” Apparently, except to a very highly skilled specialist, the faint pulsations of ELF signals are virtually indistinguishable from surrounding ocean chatter caused by moving fish, thermal pockets, even movements within the vessel itself. The instru-
ments required to detect ELF signals are so sensitive, in fact, that on more than one occasion radio operators have deliv-
ered to the decoding center the mistakenly logged records of their own heartbeats.

Texts can provide dimensions not readily available to paintings, objects, or even film. Written words can express more directly specific emotions, motivations, interior strategies. Yet a text oper-
ates as real only as we are reading it—you know, one line at a time—whereas we sense an object in a physical way outside ourselves and know it will still be there if we blink or look away or even cease to exist.

NR: Over the past few years, you have increasingly employed an illusion of a blackboard or slate-like surface. Is this intended to be understood metaphorically?
VF: I want the blackboard to function in several different ways, but yes, my intent is metaphorical. For me, the blackboard serves as a metaphor for mind, both memory and conscious thought. The erased portions remind me of memory traces—layers of memory—and the process of looking at and bringing into focus pertinent images out of the “background” of erased areas operates like the process of seeing. There is, of course, a reference to the tabula rasa—the clean slate as well as the unformed mind ready for the impressions gained from experience.

NR: What function do the illusionistic vignettes or inserts serve in these works?
VF: The inserts are difficult to explain. They are, of course, contradictory impulses. They appear not to belong, nevertheless they interact with the “background,” on both formal and thematic levels. The ideas for these vignettes came from cars that had been “spot-
repaired,” which I frequently see on the north side of Fort Worth where my studio is. A dented fender, say, will be filled with body putty and then sanded down and primed, but often not repainted. The fender then has the identical sculptural shape as the original but is of a different texture and color. If it is subsequently painted over, it will be indistinguishable from the original, but for some reason, people here hardly ever seem to get around to the final paint job. I have always liked these spots—they belong to the car, but are not of it. And of course the meaning is changed, too. They are not only damaged cars that have been spot-repaired. Cars with several of these unfinished repairs can be quite beautiful.

NR: Do you consider your work postmodern?
VF: If a single word could symbolize the modern period, it would be “streamlined.” The modern period was the age of the airplane, of speed through the air. Even radios were aerodynamically designed as if they were somehow expected to take off and fly through the skies. To streamline is to eliminate everything extraneous to the function, whether the function be that of an airplane, a skyscraper, or a painting. This idea comes out of considerations in science. Empiricism is essentially a system designed to streamline our interaction with the natural world in order to bring a measure of control and objectivity to our explorations—to eliminate prejudice and wishful thinking from contaminating our observations. I believe that this idea carried over into and even defined modern art—less is more, the cubist grid, the unitary form.

Artists, like scientists, became suspicious of subjectivity and began to search for a space they could occupy with some kind of certainty. As this impulse continued in the sixties, artists began to guard against anything anthropomorphic, to the extent that even the gestural, no matter how abstract, came to be seen as tainted. So artists began occupying smaller and smaller islands of certainty, look at the work of Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Robert Ryman. Now we are in the space age and there is no resistance to an object moving in space. Art no longer has to be streamlined. It can be any shape, have any logic.

NR: Why do you paint directly on the wall?
VF: I first started working directly on the wall when I was trying to make pieces that operated in many different ways at once. I was combining illusion with objects and texts, and part of the idea was to keep all the components different. At that point I found myself drawn to using the wall. In my mind, images painted on the wall function as a given, as part of the architecture. To me, that’s the most compelling reason to work directly on the wall—when complete, the piece has a way of seeming to have been there all along.

NR: How did the Hirshhorn as a site affect your thinking?
VF: In using the second- and third-floor emergency exits, I expect the architecture to assert itself—the physical and functional characteristics of the doors will “push back” against the images that I paint over them.

I like my work to interpenetrate with the world. I like not knowing where the world ends and the artwork begins. In such circum-
stances one can have a difficult time sorting things out. What is given and what is added? In this instance, are the emergency doors still emergency doors? In an emergency, will they still “emerge” as exits to safety?

I want to build up an array of possible connections between notions about merging and refocusing—emergency, danger, safety, the immediate, the future, the past; operations and parallels between site and ideas—to indicate a few. I would like these notions to coalesce into momentary constellations of meaning that will disintegrate almost as they are formed. Ultimately, I expect the process to induce a short-circuit, leaving the viewer with a kind of cognitive failure.
Lecture On Photography

Of all the arts, photography seems to be the best suited for penetrating the nature of reality and existence. Taken at the decisive moment, a photograph can not only capture in visual terms space and time as defined by light, but can render intelligible, more surely than any of the arts, the essential structure and meaning of the undifferentiated world. It is able to accomplish this, moreover, completely free of the problems of credibility inherent in other media. As depicted, a photograph is believable. Photographs make the image so free from obfuscations of hand, of point of view, and yet so complete with authoritative truth, that it becomes credible on its own terms, quite unencumbered with the teleological historicism central to the practice of modernist painting and sculpture.

Lecture on Photography, 1988, installation in Not for the Living Room, a group exhibition at Diverse Works in Houston. Paintstick, acrylic, latex on wall and fire extinguisher.
BIOGRAPHY


SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1978 Warehouse Living Arts Center, Corsicana, Texas.
1983 Madison (Wisconsin) Art Center, Bridge.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1971 Fort Worth Art Center Museum, Thirty-Fourth Annual Exhibition for Artists of Tarrant County and Members of the Fort Worth Art Association.
1979 Archer M. Huntington Gallery, University Art Museum, University of Texas at Austin, Made in Texas; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Fire! An Exhibition of 100 Texas Artists; Witte Museum, San Antonio, Paper Works: An Exhibition of Texas Artists, and tour.
1986 Centro Cultural Arte Contemporaneo, Mexico City, Memento Mori; John Weber Gallery, New York, WallWorks.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


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HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN
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