

Three Key Words: *Autobiography, conversation, text*

Name: *Ellie Day*

Student Number: *1801019*

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Tutors Name: *Alexander Duncan*

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When I think about my own practice, a number of keywords jump out at me. I am highly interested in the way some artists look at everyday people and mundane situations to inspire them in a creative way. Taking ideas home that will allow them to create an amazing piece of work from somewhere that would otherwise be overlooked or assumed banal. I am also captivated by the way artists use their work as almost a diary form. Using personal experiences to impact the stories they convey within their practice. Admiring the directness of using text alone for hard-hitting statements, these points have all massively influenced my practice. Therefore, the three key words that I will be exploring are conversation, autobiography and text.

Conversation can be an essential inspiration to an art practice. Sometimes you hear sentences in public that stick in your mind even though those words were not even meant for you to hear. Spending many hours travelling for instance, surrounded by people right next to you all in completely different situations, becoming an aural observer, is something I find intriguing. One artist that is influenced by other people and the circumstances we find ourselves in is Barbara Kruger. By using

“pictures that entice and beguile only to accost us with accusatory words”
(Linker and Kruger, n.d.)

Kruger's involvement within the art community began when she was 18 after getting 'a job at Conde Nast publications.' (Barbara Kruger: in her own words, 2016) This is where she found her love for the 'sense of play of combinations and possibilities' (Barbara Kruger: in her own words, 2016) surrounding text and images. The artist creates work in which she 'hopes broadens the meaning or enriches it' (Barbara Kruger: in her own words, 2016) by taking 'certain words or phrases that are familiar to people and combines them with other words and images.' (Barbara Kruger: in her own words, 2016)

Kruger explores many subjects within her practice including 'the power of pictures and the power of media' (Barbara Kruger: in her own words, 2016) as shown in her piece *a picture is worth more than a thousand words*. Kruger really considers the availability of her work to the viewer as she 'remembers going to galleries when she was young, totally intimidated because certain works need to be decoded.' (Barbara Kruger: Part of the Discourse | Art21 "Extended Play", 2018) Conversation can have a very varied interpretation. When we consider this, we do not just think about having a verbal connection with some body, but also advertisements, tv programmes, films, news articles and the media are all other sources that feed us information which can affect the ways in which we think. This is something that Kruger really focuses on within her practice. Her work even imitates, in a way, an advertisement look by using 'a Futura bold font over a black and white image' (Barbara Kruger – Consumerism, Power and the Everyday | Fresh Perspectives | Tate

Collective, 2016) which is 'really arresting when you see it in a gallery.' (Barbara Kruger – Consumerism, Power and the Everyday | Fresh Perspectives | Tate Collective, 2016)

Known for his drawings and words that display 'an inventively mordant wit, while encapsulating the banalities and failures of everyday life and society,' (Lauson and Shrigley, 2012) David Shrigley creates pieces that show those mundane situations and experiences with a hint of dark humour. Shrigley works with a wide variety of mediums including 'sculpture, painting, photography, video and installation.' (Lauson and Shrigley, 2012) The artist aims to 'communicate as simply and directly as possible' (Lauson and Shrigley, 2012) within his drawings and to do this he uses minimal means. I feel Shrigley uses his work as a way of shedding light on otherwise heavy situations such as 'dilemmas, moral crises and burdens of responsibility that fill our lives' (Lauson and Shrigley, 2012)

ABSOLUTELY NO PROBLEM AT ALL
EVERYTHING IS TOTALLY FINE

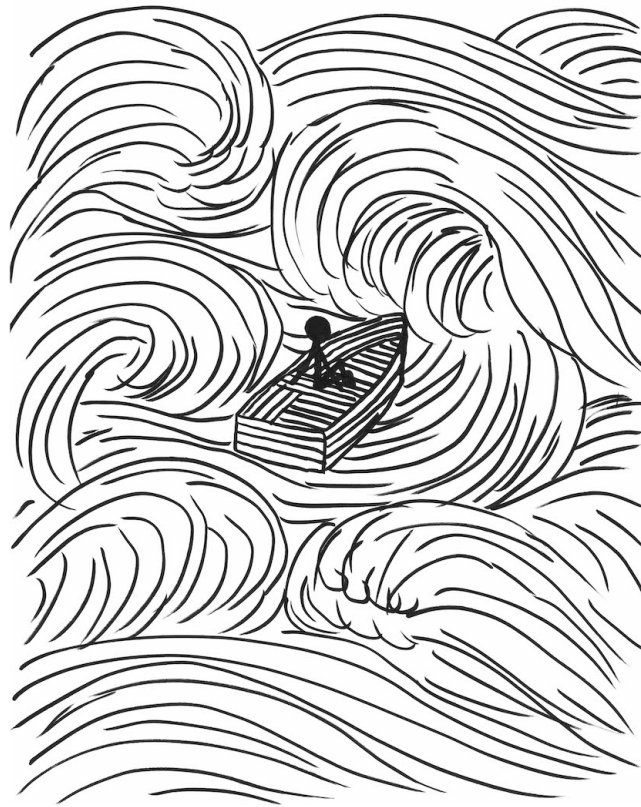


Fig 1 Absolutely no problem at all, 2019

The sense of play and allowing yourself to not get too absorbed into certain situations, seeing them for what they really are, is something I really admire about these artists. Shrigley and Kruger both have a simplicity among their work which conveys the message on delicate subjects immediately to the viewer. As conversation can be such a broad term and can throw out a considerable amount of inspiration, directness grabs attention from the audience in a unique way. Before these unprecedented times, I looked at conversation as a never ending source of revelation. It was not going anywhere, you would always be able to overhear opinions being stated and people communicating with each other, but those times have changed and right now we are not able to hear people talking to each other as they normally would, face to face or about mundane things happening within their life. Perhaps conversation is not so much of a reliable source as we originally thought. Something I would like to explore more is how art works that have grown from situational innovation varies from person to person depending on a range of circumstances.

Another keyword I want to explore is text. Words can be striking, they are powerful and effective, instantly delivering the message without need for decoding. One artist that focuses his practice on text is Ed Ruscha. Ruscha, born in '1937 in Omaha, Nebraska' (Richards, 2008) 'has worked in a variety of media - including painting, printmaking, drawing, photography, books and film.' (Richards, 2008) As there is such diversity within his work, there is a unique ambience to each piece, from 'playful' (Richards, 2008) to 'profound.' (Richards, 2008) Ed Ruscha has been

‘making work in Los Angeles for the better part of a century.’ (Ed Ruscha: Buildings and Words, 2016) and his work has reflected his life acting as a timeline almost throughout his career. I feel the artist also overlaps with my last keyword I want to look at which is autobiographical. This is because in the 1960s, Ed would travel between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City frequently. He began to take photographs of gas stations that he would pass on his travels ‘and published 26 of them in a little book.’ (Ed Ruscha: Buildings and Words, 2016) Ruscha was fascinated by these buildings as he stated ‘everything about them is streamlined’ (Ed Ruscha: Buildings and Words, 2016) and described his photography book as a ‘diary.’ (Ed Ruscha: Buildings and Words, 2016)

From these photographs, Ruscha began to branch out from photography by using the original negatives from the 1960s ‘to make prints for new additions.’ (Müller., 2013) The artist began working with ‘simple, single word-works, such as Comics, from 1961, and Oof, from 1962.’ (What's Ed Ruscha saying with his "word" works? | Art | Agenda | Phaidon, 2020) These works have elements of cartoon strips and other popular sources of that time. In the 70s, Ruscha began to include more words into his works such as ‘wash then dance’ (Richards, 2008) and ‘headlights are similar to peoples eyes.’ (Richards, 2008) Much like Kruger, Ruscha maintained a simple typeface and used capital letters mainly with a ‘neutral white type on a stained background.’ (Richards, 2008) Not only taking inspiration from the popular culture of the 60s and 70s but also from snippets of conversation.

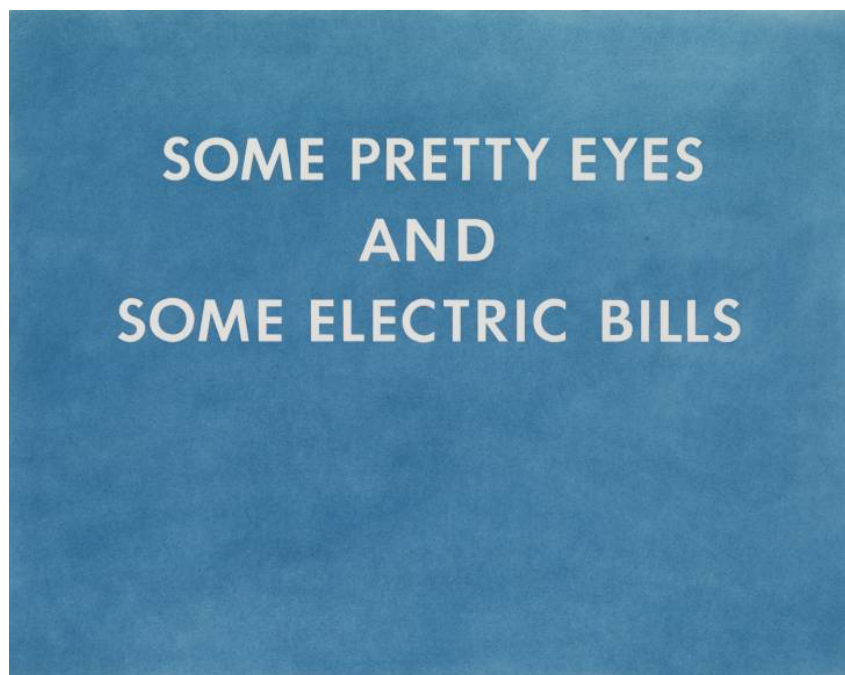


Fig 2 PRETTY EYES, ELECTRIC BILLS, 1976

‘At the forefront of American art since the early 1980s,’ (Waldman and Holzer, 1989) Jenny Holzer is described as a ‘neo-conceptual’ (groundimpressions, 2020) artist. She gained wide spread recognition after her series *Truisms* caught the eye of a large audience. *Truisms* consists of a

series of posters containing ‘numberless one-liners written from multiple points of view.’ (Holzer, Joselit, Salecl and Simon, 2001) These works were pasted up on walls around Lower Manhattan, camouflaged against the local advertisements which surrounded them. I feel this way of presenting art works, in such communal areas and especially with language based work, offers the opportunity for larger audiences to understand without even thinking too much about the meanings behind certain statements. Holzer creates strong declarations within her work ‘often blending poetics and politics.’ (Jenny Holzer's Inflammatory Essays | Why I Love | Tate, 2018) The material in which the artist uses for these statements also plays a key part in her practice, ranging from ‘baseball caps, condoms, T-shirts, pencils, cash-register receipts, in a dance performance, on electric signs to on the web.’ (Holzer, Joselit, Salecl and Simon, 2001)

Jenny Holzer explores a number of themes within her text work, including ‘feminism, gender, AIDS, the environment, class and family structures, war, sexual violence against women, and the nature of power.’ (Waldman and Holzer, 1989) Using words to tell these stories can be blunt, clear and unmasked. Text based art can also be very personal, this is especially shown in Douglas Gordon’s *List of Names* and Michael Landy’s *Break Down*, for example. The artists created a self portrait almost by writing lists of every person Gordon remembers meeting or in Landy’s case, a list of all his belongings. The viewers can see a deeper picture of the artist in these works, without seeing them physically, we can see the components that make up who they really are.

Text based art becoming a form of self portrait brings me to my final keyword which is autobiography. Artists can express their life stories through their work from conveying everyday happenings to very personal experiences. Events can be documented through artworks and can act as a diary, allowing the artist to record moments that they want to remember or as a way of working through situations that need breaking down in physical form in order for clarity in their mind. Federico Fellini, who ‘remains the best known of the postwar Italian directors,’ (Burke and Waller, n.d.) states that

"all art is autobiographical. The pearl is the oyster's autobiography."
(Popova, 2020)

One artist that works in an autobiographical way is Laure Prouvost. Exploring her themes through a range of mediums such as ‘paint, video, sound, installation, and performance,’ (Artist Talk: Laure Prouvost, 2020) Prouvost ‘combines existing and imagined personal memories with artistic and literary references, often in humorous and idiosyncratic ways.’ (Artist Talk: Laure Prouvost, 2020) Within the artists work, the viewer is put in a position where they ‘can decide what they want to believe and what they want to see.’ (Laure Prouvost | Turner Prize Winner 2013 | TateShots, 2013) This is because, aside to her pieces that are influenced by personal experiences, Prouvost

explores using statements that appear to be factual allowing the audience to make decisions on how much they believe. These statements range from 'this glass contains water from a place no ones ever been' to 'at night this water turns black.' As well as this, Laure Prouvost also looks at political themes that she is experiencing through her life such as Britain leaving the European Union. In response to this, the artist and her husband wrote a song which features the line 'stay with us, the parties just begun.' ('You are deeper than what you think' by Laure Prouvost, 2019)

In 2019, Laure Prouvost was commissioned to create work for the London Underground which, in a way, tormented the audience with text masked as advertisements or signs. Prouvost took the location of the work into account by placing her dark coloured pieces underground by tunnels and walk ways, whereas the light coloured pieces were placed above ground, on a bridge for example. The light pieces, where simple black text features on a white background, were influenced by positive memories of her grandparents where Prouvost used the quote 'in Grandma's dreams you would stay here forever and dance all night long.' The artist used quotes about her past for the work that featured underground.



Fig 3 Laure Prouvost, In Grand Ma's dream this map would always be with you and would resist the passing of time, 2019.

Although Prouvost conveys her own experiences throughout her work, it allows the viewer to relate to certain aspects. The artist states that her work revolves around 'using the personal for a bigger picture.' (Laure Prouvost Interview, 2014) She explores the idea of memories from childhood and the feelings that it leaves us with, usually remembering only the strongest or best ones. For example, when looking back the artist shares memories of picking blackberries with her mother yet she 'only remembers the best blackberry' (Opening-Day Artist Talk: Laure Prouvost,

2017) as Provoust states 'it is all about measurements.' (Opening-Day Artist Talk: Laure Prouvost, 2017)

Another artist that has autobiographical influences is Lily van der Stokker. 'Dubbed by the artist as 'sweety' works,' (Clark, Esche, Waters and Stokker, 2010) Stokker has combined ideas of 'beauty, love, relationships, family and the everyday.' (Lily van der Stokker: No Big Deal Thing – Exhibition at Tate St Ives | Tate, 2020) These mundane occurrences that the artist finds herself in, such as paying rent and comparing her life to the peoples closest to her, often features in her work. Lily begins exploring her ideas by creating 'childlike, naive drawings,' (Lily van der Stokker | TateShots, 2010) often made with 'crayons or felt tip pens,' (Lily van der Stokker | TateShots, 2010) which then get transformed into large wall paintings. Stokker's work has a variety of qualities, one being that her pieces are easily relatable to the public. With words being wrote in such a simple way with a child like innocence, the viewer can look upon her art work almost as though they're reading through a private diary for instance.

With the ideas taken from these key words, they have allowed me to explore each theme in great detail for my independent area of research. I would like to investigate the privacy of autobiographical art work and how this affects the relatability of the piece. Looking at how the viewers perception of the artist that allows their audience to see certain works which would otherwise be kept secret in a way, or hidden in a personal diary, has any differences compared to an artist that has their life kept private. Questioning how conversation can be interpreted and can appear in artistic practices in many different ways is also something that intrigues me. Along with how you may be able to grab an insight into the artist's life and the circumstances which surround them based on the conversations they overhear. Finally, the affects text and language in art has on the audience and the gallery spaces. Does the fact that some text works do not need decoding in the way other pieces may evoke, make them more susceptible to a wider audience or would it have an opposite reaction as they may not appear as traditional? All in all, I feel researching these three keywords has enabled me to discover a range of topics in which I can study in depth for my independent enquiry.

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Fig 6 1990. *List Of Names*. [image] Available at: <<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/douglas-gordon-0>> [Accessed 12 May 2020].

Fig 7 2001. *Break Down*. [image] Available at: <<https://elephant.art/break-michael-landy-subverted-digital-age/>> [Accessed 12 May 2020].

Appendix:

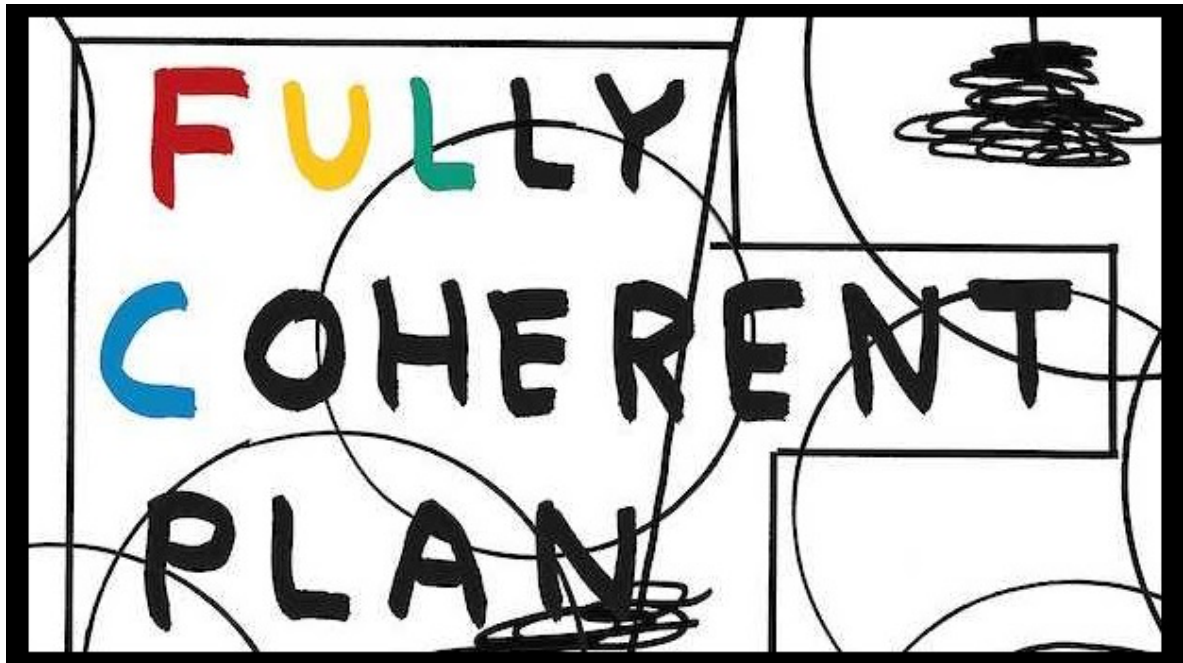


Fig 4 David Shrigley, Fully Coherent Plan, 2018

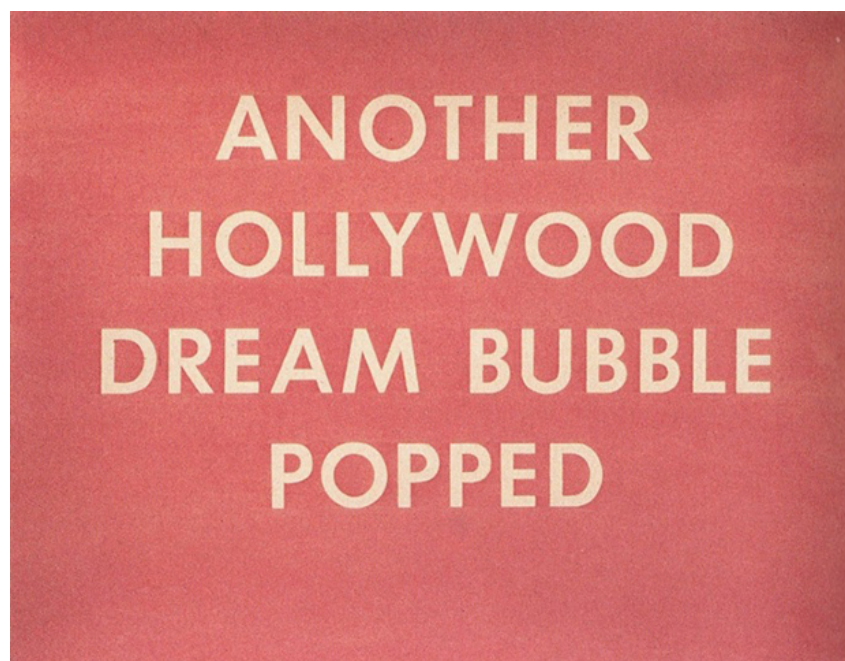


Fig 5 Ed Ruscha, Another Hollywood Dream Bubble Popped, 1976

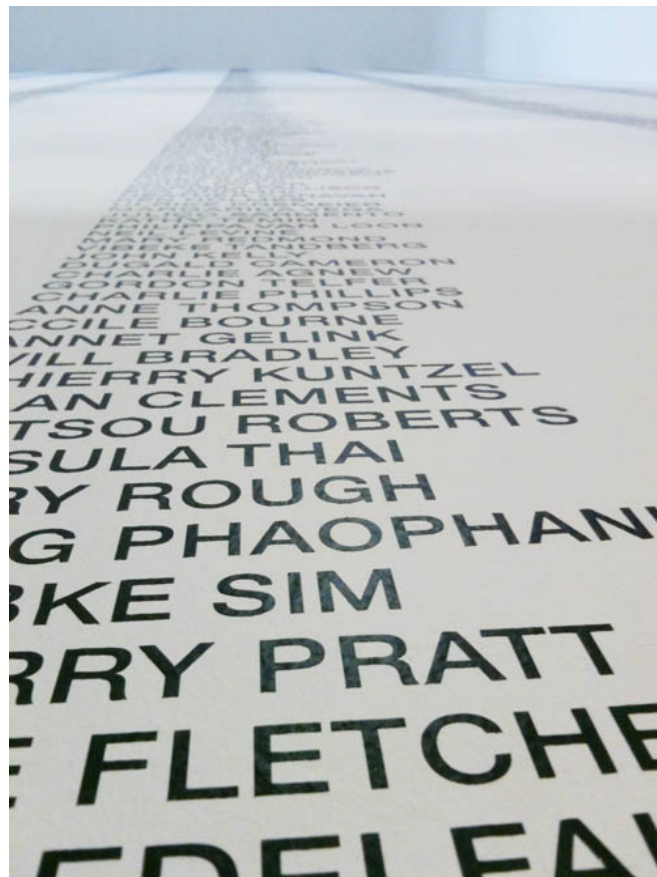


Fig 6 Douglas Gordon, List of Names (Random), 1990



Fig 7 Michael Landy, Break Down, 2001

