

"The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world ..."

Work-in-Progress ...

Cay Sophie Rabinowitz, Senior US Editor of Parkett, on Fiona Banner's recent work

I have spent the last couple of years not showing very much. I wanted to prioritize the experience of making work over the experience of showing it. Fiona Banner, 2005

Initially, upon setting out to study and write about Fiona Banner's recent works, there was an expectation that this text would situate the forms, objects and images installed in "THE BASTARD WORD" exhibition within contemporary art practice. As a whole Banner's often perplexing body of work can be called sculpture, be it crafted in readymade or tirelessly handmade media. The materials, methods and characteristic manner of engagement Banner employs recall one historical precedent in particular—the Italian artist, Ketty La Rocca—who used the most commercial forms of media to undermine the messages of advertising and to liberate language from its relationship of reciprocal dependency on the image. After making a series of politically prescient photo collages called *Poesia Visiva*, in the mid-1960s, La Rocca began to work more pointedly on simple yellow work on blue ground canvases which make the featured word itself, *parola, verbum, or mot*, both subject and object inviting viewers to fill in its meanings. In her final painting from this series the single letter, "e" and with an ellipse, "e ...", also signals endless possibilities, for "e" in Italian means "and," indicating, quite literally, an unfinished idea. By itself the conjunction "and" fulfills no meaning-function; "and" lies always between two activities or two states and becomes contextualized by what comes before and what shall follow. Similarly, Banner's art is an active scenario.

Like La Rocca, Banner strategically reifies linguistic signs in her artworks, which subtly subvert

social conventions. Despite Banner's production clearly being grounded in such established historical and contemporary art traditions, each time the reproduction of a single work is placed before me, whether graphite on paper or fighter jet flossam, my sincere attempt to describe it becomes eclipsed by an interest in how it functions as an ongoing investigation. This dynamic quality in the work seems more literary than plastic and I have spent much time ploughing through texts by Roland Barthes, Marguerite Duras and even Søren Kierkegaard seeking to understand how Banner's visual art seems to be defined by being ongoing—not merely process work but always, in some sense, work-in-progress.

Being ongoing and investigative is part of the nature of Banner's visual art practice. Rather than designate her operative activity as being appropriationist or her materials readymade, it seems rather more interesting to designate "work-in-progress" a valid category of visual art. This does not mean that Banner is merely motivated to make unfinished work suitable for exhibition. Nor does it mean that she has taken something previously relegated to the private space of an artist's studio and moved it into the museum. Rather, she recognizes that the making of a work is an activity, often direct and instantaneous, albeit framed by a number of structuring conditions, which might be social, institutional, personal, provisional, or functional. In an attempt to both highlight and also get beyond such framing devices, Banner bases each work on some iconographic cultural format produced according to specific conventions. She has transcribed her interpretation of the visual action in Hollywood war films, and made models of fighter jets

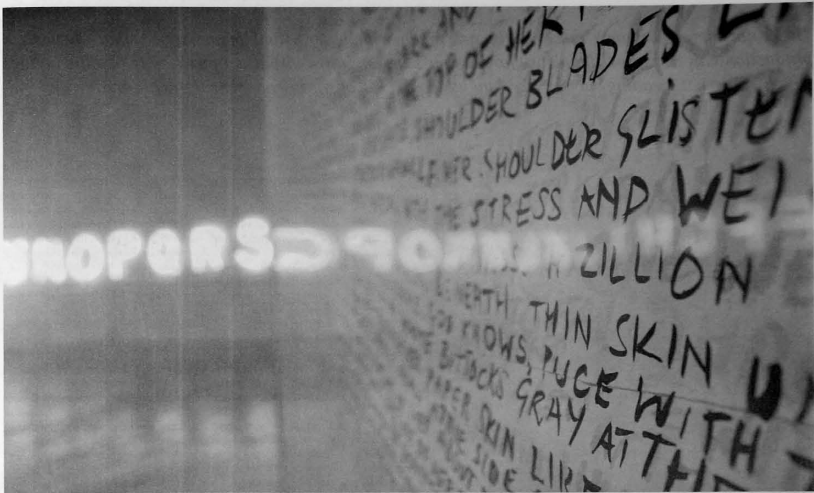
which she recently made into drawings of letters indicating the alphabet. She has made another alphabet of neon along with neon punctuation marks. And previously in *Arsewoman in Wonderland* (2001) she turned her attention to another archetypal film format, the porn feature, to record onto billboard-sized sheets of paper an extemporaneous text narrative in pink describing in much detail the actors' performance. Each point of departure Banner chooses has been crafted according to a norm defined by how it is to function. Such is the similarity between a Hollywood war film, a porn flick and a fighter jet. Each popular production that Banner uses as source material has been made to fulfill a certain goal to such an extent that its other "non-functional" qualities get ignored. Banner records her observations and reveals many of these "non-functional" qualities but she does not set out to redeem the original work. She does not attempt to construct a more accurate or appropriate version of the sourced story or subject. Even though Banner's laboriously transcribed observation might look like an unprecedented, new version of some widely circulated story—a narrative that might be commonly seen but not written or read—the artist's record is to some extent another version of the same.

In 1999 Banner transcribed *Don't Look Back*, the documentary about Bob Dylan, three times from memory which she describes in a discussion with Joanna Pocock as "a more personal project ... about my love of Dylan and how impossible it is to be a fan" (Joanna Pocock, "From Arsewoman to Explosives: A Chat with Fiona Banner," www.interviewstream.zkm.de, 2004). Their discussion leads to *THE NAM*, (1997) the publication of Banner's

unedited account of six Vietnam films, Banner qualifies the massive volume as "a tracing rather than a re-presentation." She studies mass produced and widely available source narratives or situations and generates new versions of them in unexpected genres and formats. Similarly in the recent work, *Nude Standing* (2006), Banner uses text and a single sheet of paper to translate the experience of working with a live model. The words and paper provide an unconventional format or structuring convention for the artist's re-addressing of a common subject. Banner's organization of the narrative breaks with those norms dominating the popular genres in their everyday circulation. The single page might be Banner's way of acknowledging that all narratives are subject to organizational structures, perhaps some more limiting visually, others more limiting socially.

According to Roland Barthes, every narrative employs a specific number of organizational structures that affect our reading, though each narrative instance can be unique. Rather than see this situation as limiting, however, Barthes argues that one should read a text in such a way as to bring out its multiple meanings and connotations. To turn the limited number of organizational narrative structures into a plurality of narrative possibilities requires a particular active approach. Rather than read a text for its linear plot (i.e., this happens, then this, then this), and rather than be constrained by either genre or even temporal progression, Barthes argues for what he terms a *writerly* rather than a *readerly* approach to texts. According to Barthes:

The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past)



can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages (Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 1970).

This closing of the text happens as you read, as you make decisions about a work's genre and its ideological beliefs; however, when you analyze any one sentence of a work closely, it is possible to illustrate just how impacted with meaning (and possibility) any one sentence really is. The same is true of the close reading of an image or series of images.

Like in *THE NAM*, where Banner describes films about the war in Vietnam without any attention paid to the plot or history they aim to convey, *Arsewoman in Wonderland* (2001), screen-printed on billboard paper, describes how porn actors look and every facet of their performance, from the way sweat shines on their skin, to penetration, while the living presence of a live model is described in handwritten prose in *Nude Standing* (2006). Banner obsesses over details avoided by most draftspersons such as the model breathing or shifting her weight just as Banner's own change of state is revealed in the way her handwriting becomes progressively more erratic and cramped. In each

example, Banner uses language in a direct or "un-mediated" fashion to make it depict an image separate from how that image participates in a standardized script. Both Vietnam films and porn films are crafted according to standardized plots. By describing the players themselves Banner presents them anew, without being distorted or disrupted by any pre-existing ideological narrative, plot, or genre. Though these so-called "wordscape" or "still film" texts and the nude study drawings are based on the artist's impressions of what she observes, the point of view and the language employed seems direct, not speculative.

Banner's use of such operational narrative text seems a natural companion to her works using text operatives as sculptural objects. Banner's first neon sculpture, *Neon Full Stop* (1997) is just what the title names: a period in American English, or in British English, a full stop. It is the same punctuation mark Banner rendered in large-scale polystyrene and installed at 1031PE as *Polystyrene Full Stops: Slipstream, Nuptial, Palatino, Times, Gill Sans Condensed, New Century Schibk* (1998-99), and the same punctuation she rendered in bronze, *Full Stop* (2002) and installed for her Turner Prize show at Tate Britain. As Virginia Button has written, "the full stop represents an ending but also signifies a beginning, an in between or a gap" (www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/artnow/nonabanner). This

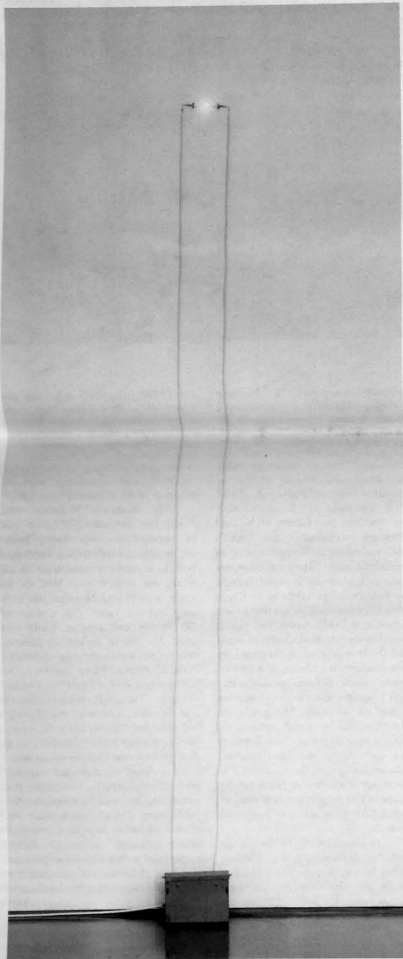
informed assessment of Banner's sculptures supports a consideration of the work-in-progress nature of this oeuvre. Banner's installations of punctuation recall both the paintings and photographs by Kety La Rocca (discussed earlier) and as well the installation, *Virgole* (1970) of oversized three-dimensional black PVC commas. In Banner's work the transient punctuation styles and situations compliment La Rocca's historical overscaled renderings of an ineffectual marker. Both artists employ these parts of speech to uncertain ends. As well, three key works by La Rocca from 1974, which share the title *Le mie parole e tu?* (My words and you?), question the apparent clarity of signs and the transparency of language. In two versions, six photos of a pair of hands assume different gestures, like sign language, and the word "you" is written on the hands. The panels are sequenced like a partial narrative of various possible relationships between two individuals; one hand reaches, clutches and covers the other, yet it is not apparent whether the hands belong to one or two people; are these male or female? Are these social or emotional gestures?

In several works by Banner the word "or" is featured as if to celebrate or pay homage to indecision. The first pieces of white neon that she bent herself feature the letters "O" and "R" and these preceded her neon alphabet work *Every Word Unmade* (2007). One neon work of two letters, *Neon*

OR (2006), literally spells out the word "OR" while the other neon work of the entire alphabet says literally nothing yet as if to be conclusively and demonstrably indecisive. The works seem absurdly noncommittal to the point of being graphically to the point—another finished "work-in-progress" work in Banner's oeuvre.

In Banner's sculpture *OR, Nude Fin Version*, (2006), a pile of twenty-five paperback books are neatly stacked atop a cardboard box. In a previous installation of the work, one volume with 'OR' on its spine was placed between the only grey volume titled *The Colour of Sky* below and another white one titled *The Art of Seduction*. Letraset text on the cardboard box spells out "OR, 25 Books / Fiona Banner / The Vanity Press 2006 / Nude Fin Version / Fragile." Though Banner has claimed that the spines feature all the titles she had considered for her last book *All the World's Fighter Planes 2006*, the work as a whole seems fittingly duplicitous. It is a sculpture about printed narrative presentations which disregards the formal and formatting conventions for publications. Usually, book titles are printed on spines to offer a potential reader access to the bound work's content and author when stored on the shelf, but in Banner's construction the relationship between author and source is made uncertain and inaccessible. The box's label "The Vanity Press," Banner's own publishing forum for all of her publications, seems an ironic

"It is not merely because these works are made with letters (and punctuation), that the artist's production can be called linguistic, for Banner's investigative visual art practice is like the actions which construct meaning, active like language which transforms reciprocally with and in society."

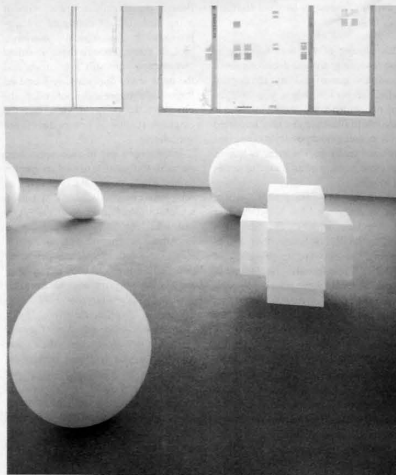


comment on the possible publication of one's own derivative multiple narratives. Presented in the space of an exhibition, the viewer, or reader, is left to interpret this offering according to yet another undecided or unexplained set of conventions.

Banner's *OR, Nude Fin Version*, is a work based on the self-made, readymade elements of a work in progress. The artist seems to be concurrently at the center of her production while she plays at being removed from it. The objects provide a survey of her activity as an artist, author, designer, publisher and packer, but is it a form of autobiography—in other words, a work about her? The way it is a sculpture of and about being cast as (and "cast out" as) a number of outside contributors to its production and circulation brings to mind Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, 1843, in which four pseudonyms are used. Victor Eremita is the fictional compiler and editor of the texts, which he claims to have found in an antique *escritoire*. "A" is the moniker given to the fictional author of the first text ("Either") by Victor Eremita, whose real name he claims to have not known. "Judge Vilhelm" is the fictional author of the second text ("Or"), while "Johannes"

is the fictional author of a section of *Either*: 'The Diary of a Seducer.' Nested in a series of interlocking frame stories, through the refractive and reflective layering of retraced narratives, Kierkegaard presents not a story to be read but rather a thesis about reading.

After making her first neon letters "O" and "R" Fiona Banner envisioned eventually making a drawing of every word, but she soon realized that there is no definitive source with every word (not even the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Being aware of language's changeable nature "in flux with new words being made constantly," Banner actively resumed the linguistic nature of her studio practice by producing versions of the alphabet in graphite on paper, *The Bastard Word* (2007) and in neon, *Every Word Unmade* (2007). It is not merely because these works are made with letters, that the artist's production can be called linguistic, for Banner's investigative visual art practice is like the actions which construct meaning, active like language which transforms reciprocally with and in society. Ultimately language is like every medium this artist takes quite literally into her hands; she grasps it and makes it perform.



Left: *Neon Full Stop*, 1997, neon, wire, transformer, wooden box, dimensions variable

Right: *Polystyrene Full Stops: Palatino, Times, Gill Sans Condensed, New Century Schlbk*, 1998, Polystyrene (left to right)