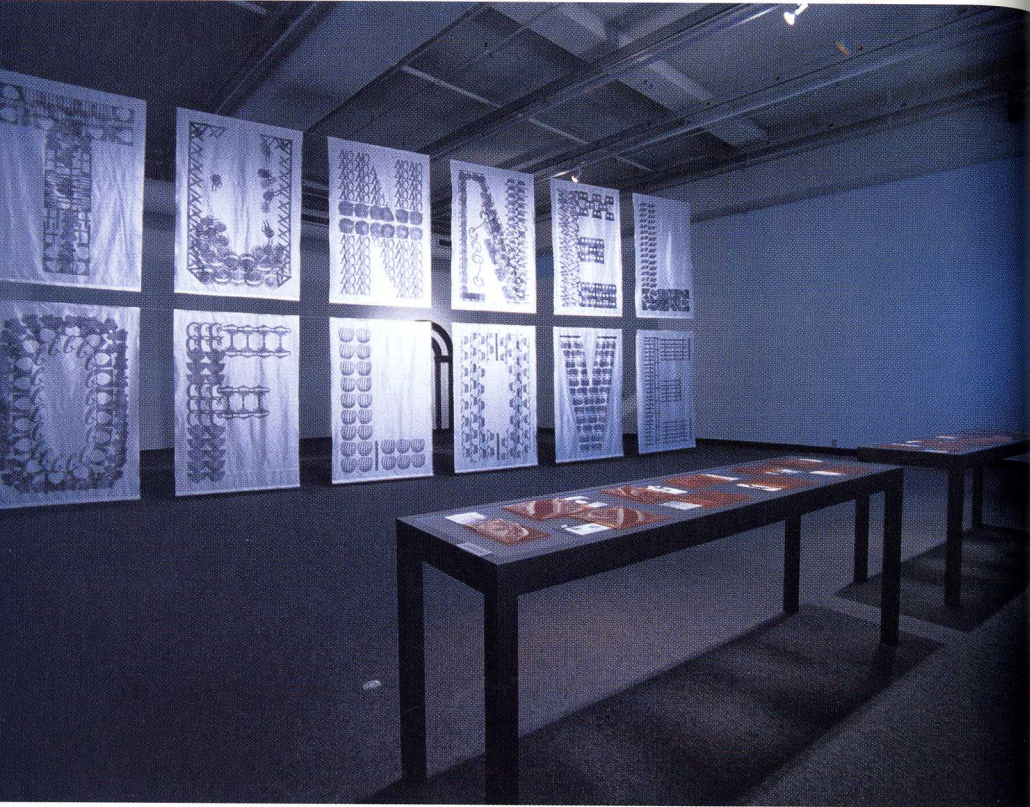


Gift Unwrapped



SURELY YOU HAVE SEEN the bright red, blue and yellow banners hanging from buildings around the city, each with a single capital letter in black and white. But you didn't know what they spelled unless you found them all: G I F T. Presumably you came to the Art Gallery of Hamilton in response to advertising and with curiosity about what the gallery might give you. Your gift waits in the gallery shop amidst other purchasable exhibition memorabilia: your own, *free* square of Patrick Mahon's gift wrap. These sheets are multiples of those making up the capital letters on the banners. So — what becomes problematic when a gallery uses multiples of gift wrap as the exhibition in banners for advertising and as give-away?

Museum London has a similar installation by Mahon. Here, banners hang in rows high above the gallery floor, spelling out while mimicking a T U N N E L O F L O V E, just like a sign at a 1950s fun park. The letters are based on packaging and logos of mid-twentieth century consumer items. The printing blocks are on display, along with

photographs of the original items. Banners, museum and documentation merge as an institution framed by letters promising you love. They merge again with the possibilities of Hamilton gift wrapped, a reminder that there is no landscape or cityscape that is not already written over and given to you in print, whether in books or on billboards. No matter where, you are thrown into a shifty landscape of printed text that you are always reading. Print can bring you knowledge of the past or hopes of the present, increasingly commercialized, environment. Since you are already reading your printed wrap, what does it offer, and what will you do with it?

While the letters for *Tunnel of Love* were derived from commercial logos and packaging, the design of the gift wrap was assembled by photographing other printed matter: the alphabet in two superimposed fonts (the building blocks of printed text), and photocopies of newspaper 'banners' concerning exhibitions of Canadian abstract art from the 1940s to the 1960s (building

blocks of art criticism and museum collecting). Mahon cut up his alphabet and photocopies, re-arranged and re-photographed them, then had the design printed as wallpaper, sliced into squares for gift wrap, laminated in plastic and sewn on to vinyl for the banners. What is given, then, is not form wrested from raw material, as a sculptor uses clay, but a layering of traces of prior readings based materially on a ground of typographic and visual design. However, since the newspaper material comes from the museum archives, the museum becomes the ground on which an archaeology of printed discourse and reading unfolds, which expands to include the problem of you, as the reader of the wrap.

The visual vocabulary of gift wrap and banners can be further examined under the idea of the index and trace. A photograph or photocopy, such as is used to make the gift wrap, is an index of light on sensitized paper, while a trace records the direct impress of an object on a support, such as the stamped elements forming the letters of

the *Tunnel of Love*. Both photographs and traces lack secure identifications. For example, can you tell who stamped the letters, what the little wing-like cipher was, or who wrote about what stripes? They are strangely mysterious and can evoke a sharp sense of loss. The collage of headlines on the gift wrap and the little figures embedded in *Tunnel of Love* underscore the way in which letters and print are signifiers and images. This is the slippery arena where visual and verbal domains partially merge. However, one does not substitute entirely for the other, leaving a gap loaded with an affective charge. Do you laugh at the tumbling humanoid egg, or rise almost instinctively to "Borduas: A Rebel Is Honored," "I paint from my belly, it's instinct, plus a gut feeling," "Singing the Joy Of Color"? Mahon has increased the intensity by creating a collage of newly interlocking phrases. While some words disappear, new linkages can emerge. His ironic commentary appears as marginalia, a piled "RAP." An inexplicable overflow of excitement and desire spills out. Although

it's not possible to re-experience the writers' or Mahon's emotions, others writing about their excitement at seeing exciting paintings can be seductive, and can stimulate your desire to read sense into the aesthetically re-figured phrases. Mahon slyly hints at this by sending you a heart, a pop culture sign of 'love,' incorporated into the T of TUNNEL. The final words replay their capacity to figure your unaccountable desire.

The print material and its ability to evoke emotions provide a basis for discussing metaphors such as "the body of the text" or "the [written/printed] Word made flesh." A text is normally defined as printed discourse. Historically, the block of printed text and support were considered as well-integrated and bounded as a biological organism, free of contaminating commentary or marginalia. As you see in the banners and gift wrap, print also possesses an expressive potential through colour, lay-out and typographic design. Like a text, your body is hierarchically organized and externally bounded. But when was the last time you

thought about "my body, the text?" Merely by appearance, our bodies are 'read' according to codes of gender, age or ethnicity, for example. Like print, we emotionally inflect our expressions which are 'read' by others. Social categories and prohibitions are inscribed in the psyche of each of us and, consequently, we are enjoined subconsciously to interpret others and ourselves through them. More interestingly, many subconsciously obeyed social norms are deposited in culturally valued texts, in which our elders have already read them, and we re-read and repeat them. The meaning of texts changes with social context. So both texts and our embodied selves 'leak' beyond their physical boundaries. However, neither texts nor ourselves are transparently legible. Thanks to readers' subconscious injunctions and the fact that texts are word and image, the link between the seen or read and 'what it means' is never complete. The gift wrap, as decorative trace of cut-up texts and re-readings, releases the present voices of absent people who sing out from the

headlines, and I am filled with curiosity about who they were and what they were specifically discussing. Their textual trace has a body like mine but is not mine, so I can only recite their excitement while mourning their obscurity. Between text and my understanding, there yawns a gap filled with my desire. The simple situation of admiring and reading my gift wrap has become rather complicated.

Into this gap step the banners wrapping their promise in magisterial capitals. But wait. The glyphs of *Tunnel of Love*, derived from packaging and logos, suggest that the most personal relationship of love has been short-circuited by commerce. Emblems such as hearts or happy faces create a universal, trivializing vocabulary of 'love' while suppressing the gift of interpersonal expression. How personal is 'love' from, say, Hallmark, which even prints its company name as a signature on the back? The ground of interpersonal promise and intimacy has shifted to for-profit enterprise and its distribution system. When business

intervenes to universalize and circulate 'love' the exchange is no longer between you and me, but diverted to commercial interests, which convert it to cash.

A gift is never neutral: it designates 'you' and 'me' and enrolls us in a circulation of meaningful exchange. In some tribal societies, gifts play(ed) a large role in re-affirming social bonds and organization, such as potlatch ceremonies in British Columbia. Today, when I give you a gift, I promise to be there for you, and call on you to do the same, with love. Promises are haunted by falsity, but I defy vagaries of circumstance and myself and promise anyway. It's a personal accounting. Understood in this way, a gift and a promise open my identity to recognition by and exchanges with another, with you, over there. But what transpires when the gift is a decorative sheet of paper offered by a collecting museum, or the sight of banners temporarily draping the city? Does the museum offer part of its collection? Does it offer even some wisdom in a text? What is

given to me is a sheet of print which leads nowhere beyond snippets at different scales of reading. I find out nothing about a group of abstract artists other than that they generated an excitement reproduced in the jazzy design of this gift wrap. It seems that museums have gotten out of the business of knowledge, and, under the imperative of commercial viability, are disseminating desire. Performing a delicate and ironic critique, the banners and gift wrap suggest a current suppression of knowledge in institutions of culture, which now substitute the simulation of desire and its satisfaction in give-aways. The present context of commerce has already written the museums' story. In accepting the give-aways, we become only consumers. Now, do you consume true gifts? I don't think so. Nor do you accept them over and over, without opening yourself and promising a return to the other. Consumption is repetition; one pronounces one's own sentence, as Marcel Duchamp once said.

Tila Kellman

