

Alex Cox
A&D 384
41/13/2006 – Reaction to reCON(TEXT)

In viewing the show reCON(TEXT), I had different reactions to all the pieces, but two pieces in particular I singled out as representing “art” and representing “not art” to me. Since I define art as a work created by the artist and I expect that work to display some technique or use of artistic methods, Chuck Close’s “Phil II (grey)” (1982) appealed to me immediately as art, while Haim Steinbach’s “00:07 (3,5L)” (1988) does not. The difference, I think, lies mostly in the materials and execution.

Close’s work is an abstracted portrait done on very thick pressed paper with ½ inch grid squares, each containing a shade of grey. When viewed at a distance, these squares come together to represent a rough portrait of a man. The work, about four feet tall by three feet wide, lends itself well to both distant viewing and close inspection, and upon close inspection the rough grain of the paper and imprints of the mesh wires it was pressed with can be seen. So, using a manner similar to the Impressionists from the late 19th century, Chuck Close creates a portrait in a new style through this work.

On the other hand, Steinbach’s work is entirely different. It starts with two triangular ledges approximately three and three and a half feet off of the floor, respectively, which overlap slightly in the middle. They are tilted so that the top is flat and the back is against the wall, creating a sort of beveled nook. Sitting on top of the nook on the left are three large institutional-style trash cans, steel coated with black enamel and domed steel lids with push-flaps. On the right are five lava lamps, a brushed brass-colored base and cap surrounding a teal-colored bottle of fluid with white bubbles floating up and down in it. The base of the lava lamps are studded sparsely with small

rhinestones. This work to me does not really demonstrate itself as art exactly, because there is no artistic technique to speak of. Any of us could create the same work by buying three trash cans, five lava lamps, and a couple shelves. Undoubtedly the work is conceptual in nature, but without knowing the artist's intent, it is impossible to classify this as art.

Chuck Close's work is more accessible as art because the artist's technique and goal is visible and easily interpreted by the viewer. He is creating a portrait, which puts him firmly in established forms of art, and utilizing stylistic abstraction, color, and geometric minimalism similar to that of the early 20th century. In eschewing traditional motifs and techniques, Steinbach makes his work less accessible to the average person (me), and therefore I do not immediately appreciate it as art.

Using these two examples, I believe that I can say that the difference between what I perceive to be art and what I perceive to be not art really comes down to one key issue, and that issue is whether or not I (or anyone else) would be able to create that work on their own. With Close's work, I doubt that many would be able to create the work, whether because they don't know how to press paper, aren't good judges of average color values to fill each square, or lack the technique to mix the colors and fill the squares. With Steinbach's work, I feel as though anyone with access to a hardware store and a junk store could assemble enough trash cans and lava lamps to create this work. On the other hand, in the postmodern era, the manual dexterity (or traditional artistic skill) or the artist is not as important as the conceptual mission of the artist, since traditional artistic techniques basically reached their zenith by the mid-to-late 19th century. The general public, I feel, has not yet learned to appreciate conceptual art because there is more to

understand than just looking at the piece, and therefore would categorize it as “not art,” while looking at a piece which involves traditional artistic methods and dexterity would be widely regarded as “art.”