



What Are Words Worth?

Fernando Bryce at Alexander & Bonin, William Powhida at Postmasters

By **Dan Cameron**

The ghost of Mark Lombardi hovers over recent exhibitions by Fernando Bryce, at Alexander & Bonin, and William Powhida, at Postmasters, both of which trafficked heavily in a fusion of text and imagery. This combination seems far easier for audiences today to digest than was the case 20 years ago, when Lombardi was one of the few working artists able to locate the proverbial sweet spot between things people want to read and things people want to look at. Breathlessly laying out the overlapping spheres of influence and power that entangle some of the world's richest corporations and individuals, Lombardi's drawings, or, as he called them, Narrative Structures, first came into being as a research tool. They were necessary if he was to visualize the hundreds of names he came across in his investigation of various financial and political scandals. Because they function both as evidentiary material and as aesthetically fulfilling objects, Lombardi's drawings continue to inform the work of artists like Bryce and Powhida who deal with information and beauty as one unified sphere of activity.

Although Lombardi laid important groundwork for the way text and image are currently deployed, he was also following important predecessors. Beginning in the 1980s, with the emergence of artists like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, words began to assume a far greater priority in American art. Although there had been plenty of examples of text-based work prior to the 1980s, most of it fell into one of two categories: pop-based appropriation of names and logos (Warhol, Ruscha) or conceptual art that employed text as a form of instruction or identification (Kosuth, Kawara). What one did not see much of— Haacke being a key exception—was text used directly as a platform for articulating political positions. Of course there were artists who spoke out and wrote about hot-button issues like the Vietnam War, but for the most part this happened outside the studio, reflecting the belief that art needed to occupy a relatively autonomous position, an arm's length from the burning questions of the day.



William Powhida, *Venice (Don't Look Now)*, 2019. Watercolor and acrylic on paper, diptych: 15 x 15 inches each, metadata: posted May 5th, 2019. 256 likes. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

Somewhat defiantly, Holzer's Truisms and Kruger's image-text compositions helped usher in an era that saw no effective distinction between positions an artist might hold on social, cultural, and political issues and how they incorporated those beliefs into their art. It could even be argued that the presidency of Ronald Reagan served involuntarily as an incubator for more forceful, confrontational approaches to the use of text and image by American artists. As a result, by the end of the 1980s many were eagerly deploying their work to protest violence against women (Sue Coe), Catholic-sanctioned homophobia (David Wojnarowicz), US military intervention in Central America (Artists Call), and numerous other pressing issues.

Given this context, the veritable explosion of text-based art during the 1990s now seems inevitable, as does a collective fatigue with this new trend, felt even before the decade had ended. Atop any list of most-frequently-uttered art world complaints during that time was: "I don't go to art galleries to read." The thesis being offered here is that the collective feeling of text-fatigue was so great by the turn of the millennium that certain emergent practices were not afforded the attention they in fact warranted. To this day, there remains disagreement over whether it wears down one's patience more quickly to read bad writing or to look at foolish or ineptly made pictures and objects. Most of us would likely prefer the latter, if only because the tactility and response to art on a sensual level is just as alive when we don't like what we're seeing as when we do. Luckily, the work of artists like Bryce and Powhida, who followed in Lombardi's footsteps while achieving greater visibility and public recognition, stimulates in both the visual and linguistic registers.



Installation view: *Fernando Bryce: The Decade Review*, Alexander and Bonin, New York, 2019. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York.

When first shown publicly during the early years of this century, Fernando Bryce's *Atlas Perú* caused an international stir. This is, perhaps, because its very existence demonstrated how central the global and post-colonial paradigm informing most biennial exhibitions had become to 21st century art practice. Bryce is from Peru, a country which for all its cultural treasures is not able to provide its artists with a clear pathway to widespread recognition—at least not one that would enable them to show their work alongside that of their international peers. Like many Peruvians, Bryce faced the choice of staying in Peru and hoping for the best, or emigrating, while still hoping for the best. His solution was, in effect, to split the difference. Bryce moved away, first to Berlin and then to New York, but his work became increasingly devoted to the specific circumstances of a Peruvian artist: both trapped outside the cultural discourses of the hegemonic West and unwilling to abandon the particular viewpoint that is his national birthright.

Atlas Peru, then, exists as an illustrated primer for aspirational post-colonialism. The work consists of 495 separate drawings whose subject matter is culled from the photographic and documental history of his country. Here Bryce draws from countless sources, and he renders all of them with a similar hand. As such, the subset of drawings exploring the fledgling Peruvian aviation industry of the 1930s is experienced in the same way as those that address the indigenous peoples' movement decades later. What all of them share for Bryce is an "emblematic" quality that condenses the combination of historical weight and national aspiration that he was searching for when he began researching advertising, magazine publishing, and tourism in Peru. Like Gerhard Richter's formulation of the same term, Bryce's *Atlas* is not a geographical guide, but a composite portrait of a time and place that never quite existed: it presents diverse views of the idealized society of the future, inevitably envisioned by those who don't know what we now know, and are the better off for it.



William Powhida, *Safariland (Direct Investment)*, 2019. Watercolor, ink, transfer, and the Internet on paper mounted on dibond, 21 1/2 x 54 inches. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

Bryce's current exhibition, *The Decade Review*, stakes out similar ground vis-a-vis the 1970s, which might be safely described as the decade during which he became conscious of the world around him. What's changed is that, although *The Decade Review* exists in roughly the same format as *Atlas Peru*, the artistic perspective has broadened dramatically. The sources for the magazine, book, and newspaper covers, not to mention the movie advertising, public notices, and national propaganda, that make up *The Decade Review* come from all over the planet and typically reflect specific regional interests. This decision perhaps reflects a growing awareness that just about everything outside the immediate purview of those few people and institutions that wield real power—whether near the center or at the furthest reaches of the periphery—is similarly disenfranchised. In *The Decade Review* a simple, unattributed "No Gas Today" sign sums up an unknown oil crisis, while the image above it captures the meeting of Nixon and Mao in 1972, and below we find a very early ad for the video Porta-Pak. The familiar covers of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *National Geographic* appear alongside the leftist journal *Critique Socialiste*, along with flyers supporting indigenous liberation movements in Algeria, Angola, and Uruguay. Refined intellectualism (*Anti-Oedipus*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) abuts cheap sensationalism (the thriller *Black Sunday*).

Within Bryce's expanded world-view, the lives of moviegoers in wealthy countries overlap with those of guerrilla fighters in the developing world, and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* hangs adjacent to the official US government report on covert warfare in Cambodia. By thus privileging the viewpoint of those who are not making Hollywood movies, waging secret wars, or inventing new consumer products, Bryce shows how the 1970s were experienced, at various levels of social transformation, by those who were essentially bystanders to the big decisions made without their input. In effect, *The Decade Review* enables us to relive a very tumultuous moment in world history, bringing it into contact with the equally turbulent chapter that we are experiencing on a daily basis.

The evolution of American artist William Powhida's work in recent years offers an enlightening contrast to Bryce's holistic attempts to describe a world on the brink of chaos. For several years, Powhida's role in the art community was that of the proverbial fly in the ointment. Skewering contemporary art's pretensions to philosophical coherence, Powhida's drawings, sculptures and performances from several years ago attempted to burst the art world's self-serving bubble of critical jargon. In doing so, Powhida exposed a bottomless need for assurance and validation that finds its fulfillment primarily through sales to prominent collectors and museums.

More recently, Powhida's interests have shifted more explicitly, even menacingly, towards the patronage system within the art world, especially as it pertains to wealthy families who exert an outsized influence on both American politics and cultural life. Two of the most compelling and intricate works in *Complicities*, his exhibition at Postmasters, feature the Sackler and Koch families, or more precisely, the entanglement between their business interests and the philanthropic activities of individual family members who have benefited from the company's practices. This used to be the third rail in American art: regardless of the critical success Haacke found by using real estate documents and photographs to call out patrons of the Guggenheim for being slumlords, his exhibition was cancelled. More recently, of course, the art world witnessed the tortuous path that led collector and philanthropist Warren Kanders to resign from the board of the Whitney Museum. At precisely the same time, a video by Forensic Architecture was screened in the Whitney Biennial that exposed Kanders's financial involvement with Safariland, a company that manufactures the tear gas used against protestors in episodes of violence in the U.S. and Israel.



William Powhida, *Barca Nostra* (Venice Biennale), 2019. Watercolor and acrylic on paper, 15 x 15 inches, metadata: posted May 12th, 2019. 129 likes. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

In his Koch and Sackler works, Powhida takes a page from Lombardi by specifying names, dates, locations and dollar amounts. But Powhida also incorporates hand-drawn portraits, famous locations, family crests, and corporate logos with a 'style-less' approach that best serves the interests of viewers/readers who want to find the most incriminating details right away, even as they scan his densely composed image-text fields to get an overview of the rest. Interspersed with these larger works are a number of smaller paintings that seem to position the individual artist in an almost unwinnable confrontation with the market, class structures, and the ever-present challenge of making a living from one's art. Despite this deeply pessimistic starting point, however, Powhida's art is, as always, deeply revealing of the ethical quandaries that a morally and ethically-attuned individual feels in today's wildly dystopian political and cultural environment. Like Bryce's insistence that the abuses and manipulations of the past live on in the present—if you know how and where to look—Powhida's newest exhibition demonstrates that the artist's true function within a genuinely self-critical cultural community is to rub our collective noses in the uncomfortable but unmistakable truth of our own ongoing complicity.