

7 Signs; removed, cropped, enlarged and illuminated (plus index)

SAM DURANT / MATRIX 147

May 18 - September 1, 2002

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art Hartford, Connecticut

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^{IN}
CHICAGO
^{IN}
AUGUST

SAM DURANT: Following the signs

The absence from downtown Hartford of large-scale retail operations gives its streets a peculiar visual silence. The gigantic fleshy billboards, logo-laden hoardings and blinking fluorescent lights that often characterize the contemporary city are seldom encountered. No stronger contrast to this quietude exists than Los Angeles, where the density and variety of advertising signage per square inch of streetscape is perpetually astonishing. It seems appropriate, then, that Sam Durant, a long-time LA resident, should conceive for his Matrix exhibition a series of illuminated signs. They are not, however, the high-tech digital screens familiar now from Times Square to downtown Hollywood. Durant has instead adapted the standard backlit display units that are the stock-in-trade of commercial advertising. Cheap, ubiquitous and endlessly adaptable, the light-box is the all-purpose vernacular form of modern American display signage.

While this format is often used for colorful photographic displays (think, for example, of see-before-you-eat fast food), Durant has taken its most basic form, which relies simply on text. The poetics of the quintessentially American sign have attracted artists before Ed Ruscha, also from

LA, most notably. Durant shares, in this body of work, something of Ruscha's interest in the uncanny things that can happen when a phrase is transformed through context and media, from one state into another. Yet Durant's thematic concerns are also highly specific.

7 Signs; removed, cropped, enlarged and illuminated (plus index) continues the artist's meditation on contemporary subjectivity through his investigation of American social, political and cultural history. Durant's interest in history is not an attempt to reconstruct a series of causal narratives that seek to explain how we arrived at "the present." Rather, Durant questions the linear reading of historical forces, recognizing their discontinuous and irrational nature. Through his engagement with the parallel histories of political resistance and artistic challenges to convention, Durant addresses the historical amnesia that so thoroughly characterizes contemporary culture and society. Unfortunately, perhaps, the repression of history does not mitigate its effects, which erupt with disturbing frequency in our increasingly unequal and conflicted world.



Miss America pageant, Atlantic City, 1968, 2002. Graphite on paper.



Freedom march from Selma to Montgomery, 1965, 2002. Graphite on paper.

Commercial signage provides the format for Durant's new work, but its subject derives from another, now much rarer mode of public discourse: the protest. In fact, the texts the artist has appropriated derive from photographs of protest marches and demonstrations around liberation struggles of the 1960s. "The criteria for selecting the images," the artist notes, "are both simple and specific. The photo must contain an image of a hand-made sign and the text or message on the sign must be general in nature... In other words, texts that could have more than one meaning depending on the context or time in which they are seen."¹

The character of the original hand-written texts is preserved through Durant's transposition of the image into vinyl letters on backlit colored acrylic. The scale is enlarged to that appropriate for an advertising sign. The protest texts operate in an ambiguous zone between written and spoken language. The visual cadence and idiosyncratic script of the protest

sign infers a declarative personal voice, as does its public setting. The privacy and formality of conventional written speech is disrupted through the visual power and immediacy of these hand-written signs. Durant's decontextualization of these image-texts allows them to float free of their original signification, open to new readings. At the same time, the artist has made a suite of drawings based on each source photograph, reinscribing the sign in its original context.

The belief in personal agency and its collective power, the mobilization of oppressed communities, the efficacy of grass-roots political action and the commitment to social justice that resonate through each of these texts are ideals that now appear to belong to another, distant time. In our new century, there is little public discourse of dissent. The market logic of advertising dominates the media. Political office appears to be open to the highest bidder. The United States, the "leader of the free world," has



Student strike, UC Berkeley, 1969, 2002. Graphite on paper.



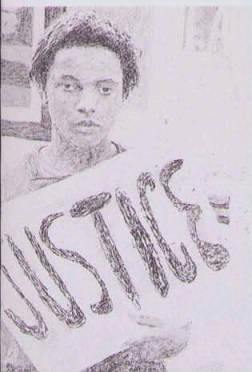
Atlanta, 1960, 2002. Graphite on paper.

embraced a free-market politics that undermines its claim to be the most democratic of western industrialized nations.

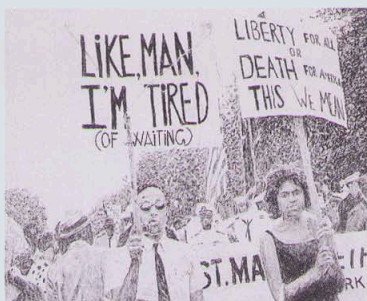
Sam Durant's transposition of the personal activist statement onto the generic advertising sign stages a clash of period and genre that opens up new possibilities. Released from its archival tomb of forgotten aspirations, the protest sign is reactivated by a new context. For example, the sign, "Like, man, I'm tired (of waiting)" originally appeared in the first massive African-American civil rights "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" in 1963. In keeping with the logic of outdoor display advertising, Durant has placed this illuminated sign on the Main Street façade of the 1842 Gothic-revival Wadsworth Atheneum building. The museum façade is a familiar site for advertising - in fact banners promoting current exhibitions are regularly featured. Durant's

sign disrupts, even as it deploys, the space of advertising. Unlike a generic slogan, this sign is written in the first person and retains a sense of individual authorship. Despite its shifted temporal and physical context it carries a non-specific inference of protest and the characteristic phrasing of colloquial African-American speech. Yet, who could not identify in some way, with the feelings expressed through these resonant words?

Today the words "Like, man, I'm tired of waiting" might be uttered by anybody, the expression "like, man..." having been thoroughly absorbed into common language and, in particular, youth culture. What does connect this phrase even more poignantly to African-American culture is its melancholy thematics of tiredness and waiting. From the Sorrow Songs and Spirituals to Gospel and the Blues, these themes have powerfully shaped black music



2002. Graphite on paper.



Civil rights march, Wash. DC, 1963, 2002. Graphite on paper.



Wash. DC, 1963

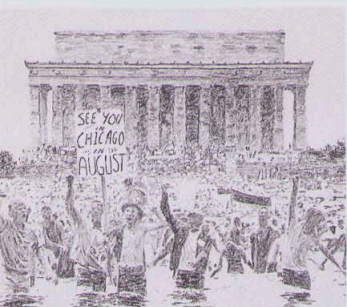
of consolation and struggle. In political terms, the refusal to wait any longer was a turning point in the civil rights movement, articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his 1964 book, *Why We Can't Wait*. The expressiveness of this sign now "removed, cropped, enlarged

and illuminated" revolves around its ability to evoke this chain of associations just as it opens itself to new meanings, both public and private, that are entirely different.

As a public statement it can clearly be read in relation to the bus stop directly in front of the museum's main



Study for outdoor sign, 2002. Digital collage.



68, 2002. Graphite on paper.

entrance. It is at this very geographic point that Hartford's worlds of privilege and poverty divide along the lines of race and class: the people who wait for the bus here are mostly black.

The tragic irony in Hartford is that the public bus - that historic site of black struggle for basic democratic rights - is now symbolic of economic disadvantage. Another reading might personify the museum itself as a voice of frustration on behalf of urban Hartford. Even the most venerable of cultural institutions could grow tired of waiting for the city's downtown revival. Each of these readings, and those suggested by the other signs displayed in the Matrix gallery, carries a certain humor. This is partly the playful humor of incongruous or displaced speech, yet it is also the wry acknowledgment of sentiments that

now seem quaint or impossibly idealistic. For example, one of Durant's signs, drawn from a 1968 feminist demonstration in Atlantic City against the Miss America pageant declares, "Let's judge ourselves as people." In today's popular culture even the words "protest," "equality," and "feminism" seem often to have become the risible or nostalgic signifiers of a bygone era.

The sequential presentation of illuminated signs along one wall and pencil drawings along another in the Matrix gallery both suggest and frustrate a narrative reading from one sign to the next. With their idiosyncratic script and different background colors (chosen to evoke both the United States flag and artist David Hammons' *African-American Flag*²), each sign creates its own atmosphere while contributing to an overall effect. The balanced sequence of texts does not form a grammatically coherent narrative, although it does create a polyphony of voices, each struggling to speak some kind of truth. Durant's striking drawings of the source photographs provide what he terms an "index," revealing the documentary context for each sign, already mediated via photography. Thus Durant's transpositions play in both directions from the hand-made to the commercially produced and from the photographic

to the hand-made. These changes of state emphasize the iconicity of the signs and the contextual nature of linguistic meaning even at the point of origin.

Durant's signs raise the thorny question of "authenticity," a contested notion in relation to authorship and, more fundamentally, constitutive of the concept of race. Durant's mining of the black and feminist archive may offend those whose essentialist views of race and gender require "authentic" membership in order to speak. Sam Durant, who is white and male, does not attempt to speak on behalf of blacks or women. His work does, however, recognize the extent to which his own culturally privileged position is constituted in relation to the historical struggles of those that have been, and continue to be, oppressed. As the contemporary black intellectual Cornel West has argued, the segregation of legitimate speech along racial lines simply reinforces the morally and politically limited category of race. This is not to argue that the very real and devastating effects of racial categorization have not been felt in the past, as they are today. However, West advocates an ethical position that transcends race as the exclusive basis for social reform: "to replace racial reasoning with moral reasoning."³ Sam Durant's work reminds us that the liberation movements of the sixties and their

legacy are fundamental to American history in general, and that they have influenced the lives of Americans of all backgrounds.

In one sense, Sam Durant's work departs from a recognition of the mutable, context-dependent nature of language. Yet, even as we find personal meaning in each phrase, we are conscious that their original motivation belongs to another specific time, place and author. Through this dialectic, attention is drawn to our own investment in American history, culture and politics, and to our varied, formative experiences of participation, exclusion and difference.

Nicholas Baume
*Emily Hall Tremain Curator
of Contemporary Art*

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1 Sam Durant, artist's statement, April 2002.

2 David Hammons' flag, made in 1990, follows the format of "stars and stripes," but uses the colors red-orange, green and black.

3 See Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001; originally published: Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 38.

These issues are elaborated in Chapter Two, "The Pitfalls of Racial Reasoning."

Sam Durant Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2002

Kunstverein Dusseldorf,
Dusseldorf, Germany
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles, CA
Artist-in-Residence, Walker Art
Center, Minneapolis, MN

2001

"Southern Tree, Tree of Knowledge,
Dead Tree (part one),"
Galleria Emi Fontana, Milan, Italy
"Consciousness Raising Historical
Analysis, Pain plus Time Separated and
Ordered with Emphasis on Reflection,"
Kunsthof Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

2000

Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
"Proposal for Monument in Friendship
Park, Jacksonville, FLA.," Statements,
Art Basel, Basel, Switzerland and
Blum & Poe, Santa Monica, CA

1999

"Into the Black," Kapinos,
Berlin, Germany "Altamont,"
Blum & Poe, Santa Monica, CA

1998

"Ohio," (with Andrea Bowers),
Dogenhaus Projekte/Kapinos,
Berlin, Germany

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2002

"Artists Imagine Architecture,"
The Institute of Contemporary Art,
Boston, MA (cat.)
"From the Observatory," Paula Cooper
Gallery, New York, NY
(curated by Robert Nickas), (cat.)
"Out of Place: Contemporary Art and
The Architectural Uncanny," Museum
of Contemporary Art Chicago,
Chicago, IL, (cat.)

2001

"Record All-Over", Mamco,
Geneva, Switzerland
"Playing Amongst the Ruins,"
Royal College of Art Galleries,
London, England, (cat.)
"In Between: Art & Architecture,"
MAK Center for Art & Architecture,
Los Angeles, CA
"New Settlements," Nikolaj Copenhagen
Contemporary Art Center,
Copenhagen, Denmark

2000

"'00," Barbara Gladstone Gallery,
New York, NY (cat.)
"LAEX," Ileana Tounta, Athens, Greece
"ForWart," L'Espace Cultural BBL,
Brussels, Belgium
(curated by Paul Schimmel)

1999

"What Your Children Should Know
About Conceptualism,"
Neueraachenerkunstverein,
Aachen, Germany
"Making History," Center for Curatorial
Studies Museum, Bard College,
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
"The Living Theatre," Salzburger
Kunstverein, Germany (curated by
Diana Thater), (cat.)
"Other Narratives: Fifteen Years,"
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX
(curated by Dana Friis-Hansen), (cat.)

1998

"L.A. or Lilliput?," Long Beach Museum
of Art, Long Beach, CA
(curated by Michael Darling), (cat.)
"Slipstream," Center for Contemporary Art,
Glasgow, Scotland
"Entropy at Home," Ludwig Museum,
Aachen, Germany (curated by Wilhelm
Schurmann), (cat.)
"Trash," Barnsdall Municipal Art Gallery,
Los Angeles, CA

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2001

Coles, Alex, "Revisiting Robert Smithson in Ohio: Tacita Dean, Sam Durant and Renee Green," *Parachute 104*, fall 2001, pp. 128-137

Comer, Stuart, "Sam Durant Interviewed by Stuart Comer," *Untitled*, Spring 2001, pp. 7-9

Fontana, Emi, "Sam Durant," *Flash Art*, August-September 2001, pp. 97-98

2000

Hettig, Frank-Alexander, "Sam Durant," *Metropolis M*, June-July 2000, pp. 50-53

Ichihara, Kentaro, "Sam Durant," *Bijutsu Techo*, March 2001, pp. 146-152

Meyer, James, "Impure Thoughts: The Art of Sam Durant," *Artforum*, April 2000, pp. 112-117

Relyea, Lane, "Less a Review Than a Long Digression On Sam Durant's Show at Blum & Poe," *Xtra*, Volume 3, Issue 2, pp.8-10

1999

Joyce, Julie, "Sam Durant at Blum & Poe," *Art issues*, November/December 1999, p. 45

Miles, Christopher, "Sam Durant, Blum & Poe," *Artforum*, November 1999, p. 148

1998

Miles, Christopher, "Sam Durant: Going With the Flow," *Art/Text*, November 1998 - January 1999, no. 63, pp. 48-53

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Matrix gallery:

Let's judge ourselves as people, 2002
Vinyl text on electric sign, 69 x 48 inches.

Tell it like it is, 2002
Vinyl text on electric sign, 58 x 64 inches.

US historians, 2002
Vinyl text on electric sign, 40 x 82 inches.

Welcome back, 2002
Vinyl text on electric sign, 48 x 58 inches.

Justice, 2002

Vinyl text on electric sign, 38 x 70 inches.

Like, man, I'm tired of waiting, 2002
Vinyl text on electric sign, 59 x 66 inches.

See you in Chicago in August, 2002
Vinyl text on electric sign
53 1/2 x 44 inches

Miss America pageant, Atlantic City, 1968, 2002. Graphite on paper, 15 x 20 inches.

Student strike, UC Berkeley, 1969, 2002. Graphite on paper, 20 x 15 inches.

Freedom march from Selma to Montgomery, 1965, 2002
Graphite on paper, 15 x 20 inches

Atlanta, 1960, 2002
Graphite on paper, 20 x 14 7/8 inches.

Untitled, 2002
Graphite on paper, 20 x 15 inches

Civil rights march, Wash. DC, 1963, 2002.
Graphite on paper, 15 x 20 inches.

Wash. DC, 1968, 2002
Graphite on paper. 15 x 20 inches

Main Street entrance:

Like, man, I'm tired of waiting, 2002
Vinyl text on electric sign, 81 x 88 inches.

All works courtesy of Blum & Poe, and Galleria Emi Fontana.

MATRIX LECTURE

2p.m., Sunday, May 19, 2002
Sam Durant delivers an informal artist's talk in The Museum Theater

GALLERY TALK

12 noon, Tuesday, May 28, 2002
"Radical Legacies: American History in the Art of Sam Durant"
Joanna Marsh, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art

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