

middle of all his wares, so collectors pick what they want by filling out an order form in triplicate. Filling out the order form, though, is a nearly impossible task, and viewers quickly get a sense of how daunting a project it would be to make all the decisions necessary to pick a photograph from this very open system. In a wry move Hammerness suspends a life-size photograph of a flailing body overhead, (over)emphasizing the idea that *U-Pic-It* spins quickly out of control because of its lack of limits. Although this piece deals with a description of an open system (an incompleteness), it becomes a parodic critique of the art world's pretense of openness in which the curator/viewer has a seemingly open and limitless set of choices that in fact, are only various permutations of a single set of choices. This piece is a curious inclusion given that it functions more as a critique of limitations of Late Capitalism than of work that is open and limitless.

In Rory Devine's *Untitled*, the viewer is fortunate indeed to encounter a single piece that exemplifies the best of the show's ideas. Devine combines text with lights, a cord, and a highly reflective Plexiglas surface to make a compelling open-ended, ambient construction. Black-lettered text painted on the wall spells out disjointed narrative, quixotic slogans and fragments like GRASSHOPPER/WE MADE YOU/VERY ARTISTIC, and RED LIGHT RIVER/Meet Brenda Vaccaro, that stir associative personal memories and create an aura of failed Hollywood vanities. Simultaneously, a large Plexiglas panel, with its highly reflective surface, destroys the possibility of a monocular viewpoint by reflecting everything in its path including the text (its own elements), the museum architecture, other people near enough to be reflected, and the viewer. Truly, one of the unique pleasures of this piece is watching your own objectification amidst a cacophony of visual stimuli. What distinguishes Devine's piece from all others is that he not only investigates partiality and fragmentation as a model, but he also introduces a truly intersubjective piece.

"Action Station" provides a lively collection of many interactive works that are curated in the spirit of providing a model for non-linear, non-hegemonic, and hermeneutic art practice. But few works, with the exception of the ones I have cited, manage to wrestle with and/or explore the multiplicity of material and conceptual possibilities within the vast intellectual framework of interactivity and incompleteness.

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In L.C. Armstrong's model, paintings are punctured and marked by burns, smoke, bullets, stains, or enamel, and coated in resin, sealing the evidence of their making behind a seductive film. And sculptures, assembled from synthetic or industrial materials, employ isolated painterly tactics. That the cool detachment of the object is interrupted by touch, by the hand and the body of the maker, questions the status of the representation.

What follows is a reading of Armstrong's project as a cycle of recombinant strategies that continually return to the sites of ambiguity built into language and representation. As such, it develops as a series of leaps to associations and links made by her work.

Categories divide, separate, and establish oppositions. Armstrong synthesizes; the vocabulary of Abstraction and Minimalism fuses with Conceptual and Process art. The state of suspension marking Minimalism's position between grounded experience and ephemeral transcendence merges with a base desire to express. The analytical reticence of Conceptual art mixes with an intuitive drive fueled by an attention to process and physicality.

Armstrong says she is making a new visual language while unmaking the already encoded dictions of her predecessors. For her it is a continual cycle of making and unmaking that has at its core an exploration of the very nature of expression, communication, representation, and language.

The model of identity and difference that forms a paradigmatic basis of meaning—that something cannot be this and not this at the same time—is a source of perpetual investigation for Armstrong. She seeks to blur the lines that bisect Western thought into bipolar categories. She treads the wasteland between opposites to expose the concept of absolute dichotomies as a fiction. Writing is both verbal and visual. Representation is a presence that points to an absence. Making is also unmaking.

Making present. Making sure. Making up. Making clear. Making is a process that, as Elaine Scarry describes in *The Body in Pain; The Making and Unmaking of the World*, “entails two distinct phases—making up (mental imaging) and making real (endowing the mental object with a material or verbal form).” The interior activity of making is imagining, while the exterior activity is reproducing, either materially or verbally, the mental object. In the movement from interior to exterior, an economy of loss comes into play as the external artifact, verbal or material, becomes a copy of an imagined original and part of the intangible self becomes translated into an object in the world. This loss spurs anxiety and ambivalence at the threshold of language and expression.

That anxiety is embodied by Armstrong’s *Dream Machine*, 1992. A cold metal adjustable bed holds a raw foam mattress punctured by nearly 4,000 sharpened silver pencils. The bed—a site of creation, birth, and recuperation, as well as death. The pencils—a bed of nails inscribing a sentence, for a crime of language, onto the body. Language can be both productive and destructive; it can make and unmake.

Language is commonly divided along the line separating verbal from material communication. The voice is fluid, unanchored, and an extension of the self into the world. Writing is solid, static, and containing. Verbal expression is based on temporal arrangement and appeals to the ear, while writing/material expression is based on spatial arrangement and appeals to the eye. The gap between the poles of speech and writing narrows within two constructs of the language that are bound to the body and are critical elements of Armstrong’s work—braille and poetry. Within these systems, she explores language as a visual and tactile as well as an aural experience.

Braille is a system of writing for the sightless that conveys the phonetic Roman alphabet through permutation of six raised dots within a grid. The use of braille may be construed as a trope of modernism, since it points to readable content within the sacred grid. A series of Armstrong’s braille paintings encase squares of vivid color in a thick, viscous layer of gray resin. The dot reliefs, ironically the only place the color is visible, spell the shades sealed below.

Brick Red, Cardinal Red, Cherokee Red, Crimson, Geranium Lake, Maroon, Rust, Scarlet, Venetian Red, Vermilion, 1993, suspends and synthesizes its meaning between verbal and visual, reveal and conceal, and compel and repel. The verbal description does not match the visual experience; the braille reveals, while the gray resin conceals; the tactile nature of braille compels one to touch, but that desire is denied. In removing braille from its functional context, it becomes apparent that the braille equivalent of red no more conveys the sense experience of red than does the phonetic equivalent. Again, the paradoxes inherent in language and representation stir an ambivalent anxiety.

Poetry differs from painting as speech varies from writing. Armstrong conflates these categories in a number of bomb fuse paintings with surfaces scarred by burnt lines that replicate fields of poetry.

The Library, 1993, reproduces stanzas of a William Carlos Williams canto of the same name. The source of the lines is the third book of *Paterson* (1947), which recounts a search for identity through analogies of man and city. As Paterson visits a library his thoughts are deadened by the cacophonous roar of books, tomes of the past. A blazing fire silences the roar. For Paterson, the fire does not destroy but transfigures, releasing him to discover avenues of expression in the melded voices of yesterday. Like Williams, Armstrong believes that to make one’s own language one does not recycle the language of the past, but transmutes and remakes it.

Armstrong executes her controlled burns by tacking fuses according to the lengths of lines and patterns of stanzas or paragraphs to a wood support. She ignites the fuses, tracing absent texts. Wounded by words, the lines resemble cauterized gashes. After, she coats the ceremonial scarification in a membrane of resin, a salve to soothe the burn or a coating to trap the meaning. As she makes the visual language of poetry present, she unmakes its verbal counterpart. The fuse never reaches the bomb. The bang is silenced.

The silent presence of Armstrong’s material signifiers underscores their communicative power. *Autumn in New York*, 1993, freezes the blast of bullets striking aluminum in resin and inscribes the event only in the starburst echoes left by the gunpowder. Across the two aluminum panels, lyrical lines deliberately mar the accumulated layers and intersect with what appear as scattered blank sheets of paper, punctured by bullets and washed with a thin veneer of gray paint. Sterile resin coats the scene.



L.C. Armstrong, "Fever 103" (Sylvia Plath)
1994, bomb fuse burn & resin on wood.
Courtesy of the artist.

The image functions as a voiceless record, an accumulation of circumstantial evidence that does not quite fit its technically and visually refined presentation. The silence is elevating.

Silence, like writing, is a container. It is the opposite of the voice, which acts as a vehicle of self-extension. The blank page as silence materialized is a subject of *Overflow*, 1993-94. This installation work assembles seven elongated aluminum clipboards, akin to those carrying medical charts, outfitted with small reading lamps casting red light on gray latex skins clenched by a metal clip and trailing onto the floor. As they lean against the gallery wall, the lamp pours red light across the sheets lined like notebook paper in red ink; blood lines spill from surrogate hearts onto prosthetic skins. The imagery is sterile and painful as the sheets await inscription, prescription.

That pain silences because it resists verbal and material objectification is the subject of Elaine Scarry's book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. One of Scarry's central premises is that to have great pain is to have certainty, while to witness pain in another is to have doubt. From this, her text establishes critical links between the status of pain, the imagination, and expression, links that seem to be elucidated by L.C. Armstrong in her material studies of the capacity of language to make and unmake.

Through tactics of displacement and synthesis, Armstrong sets in motion a transformative process, which does not destroy or repress language but reveals its expressive potential. Unmaking becomes making.