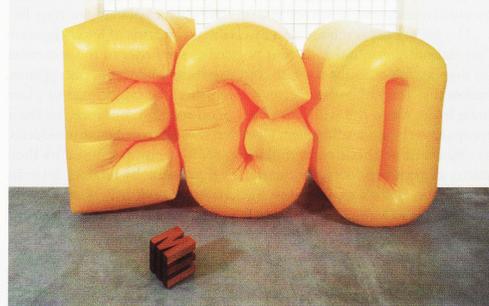


## ARTFORUM

## NANCY DWYER: FISHER LANDAU CENTER FOR ART

Which of these things is not like the other: history painting, portraiture, landscape, still life, words? Even as late as 1970, one still assumed that “studio majors” would find “words” misplaced on a list of the academic genres—even if, by then, it was also as likely that the academic genres themselves would no longer be recognized as such, so complete was the rout of academicism by that date.

This was all felt rather keenly during the era when an art of “word as image” began to take hold. Nancy Dwyer added the skills of the



commercial sign maker to this theoretical mix; by the mid-1980s, she had mastered the aphoristic reductivism of the logo and begun her efforts to convey big messages with the intriguing use of the single word or even, at times, the single word's constituent letters, disarranged. A simple example is *LIE*, 1986: (1) a falsehood, (2) a position, as when the sculpture is placed “lying down,” (3) the three sans-serif letters of the work's title laminated in faux-*marbre* Formica. Such conceptual ironies project an epistemic content that replaced the word's ostensive significance as verbal meaning elided into abstract form.

Apart from being cleverly droll, Dwyer's works at times reveal a certain revulsion in the face of consumerist vulgarity. *BIG EGO II*, 2010, is a huge, bloated, yellow-nylon inflatable that overwhelms, in this presentation, *The ME Block*, 1988, a tiny cubic *me* built of mahogany and brass that sits before the larger work. Dwyer's smarting social conscience is similarly apparent in *FOOD*, 1990–2012, composed of four galvanized trash cans reconfigured to form the shape of large sans-serif letters, a signifier of the arrant waste generated by American over-privilege. Also in this vein, the large digital print *Entitled to What*, 2006–12, depicts a dizzying array of American-dream household appliances. The work's title moves, as it were, from the barely liminal to the glowingly visible in the white space between these quotidian objects.

*KILLER*, 1991, a key piece, is a lacquered aluminum table: Its bold sans-serif top spells out the title, and its legs are as threatening as scimitars. In this and other works, Dwyer's message is often ambivalent, perhaps revealing a certain hostility toward critical exegesis. For *BLAH BLAH BLAH Britannicas*, 1998, a set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica has been die cut into thick sans-serif *B's*, *L's*, *A's*, and *H's* and tossed into a pyre-like mound. Book burning cannot be far behind.

Thus, Dwyer “deconstructs” ideology—to remind you of that '80s buzzword—through the use of the very methods inherent to whatever credo is on the carpet. For capitalist culture, the usual suspect, this means the reversal of advertising's presumed aims: the delivery of mind-numbed consumers. Instead, Dwyer sharpens her audience's awareness.

Such inverse thought was nourished by Dwyer's completion of her undergraduate degree at State University of New York, Buffalo (a capital city of Pictures theory), during the 1970s, and by her membership in the gallery Hallwalls, which she founded with such Pictures luminaries as Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman in 1974. Though the New York gallery world took notice, leading to her inclusion in the Whitney Biennial of 1987, Dwyer never became as well known as some of her peers. Hence, this long overdue thirty-year survey of thirty-three sculptures and paintings (the former rather carry the day) must be regarded as a vivifying corrective to the unwarranted quiet surrounding works so conspicuous by their wit, craft, and serious import.