

HYPERALLERGIC

Drivel, Drool, Babble, Blabber: An Evening with Mel Bochner

By Christopher Snow Hopkins | 24 October 2016

The highly influential conceptual artist Mel Bochner recapitulates his 50-year dalliance with the English thesaurus.



Meaningless, 2003, oil and acrylic on canvas, 45 x 60 in

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — “Blah, blah, blah, blah, amazing, awesome, breathtaking, heart-stopping, mind-blowing, out-of-sight, cool, wow, groovy, crazy, killer, bitchin’, bad, rad, gnarly, da bomb, shut up, OMG, yes, nothing, nada, nix, zilch, zero, slut, a fart, a fuck, a rat’s ass, all gone, defunct, kaput, pfft.”

So began a lively evening last week with Mel Bochner at Harvard Art Museums, where the highly influential conceptual artist recapitulated in “Tangled Up in Words” his 50-year dalliance with the English thesaurus. This concatenation of linguistic fragments — read aloud by David Roxburgh, chair of Harvard’s Department of History of Art and Architecture, by way of introducing the night’s speaker — set the tone for the address that followed, in which Bochner presented 59 slides tracking his co-option of nonsense, or “drivel, drool, babble, blabber,” in service of his artistic practice.

Among the highlights: “Portrait of Borges” (1968), a labyrinthine march of synonyms inked on graph paper; “Contempt” (2005), a campy bricolage of invective; and “The Joys of Yiddish” (2013), a 345-foot-long ribbon of nonsense (“Kibbitzer, kvetcher, nudnick, nebbish, nudz, meshugener...”) hugging the cornices of the Haus der Kunst, Munich, site of Adolph Hitler’s infamous “Degenerate Art” exhibition in 1937.

Bochner is often classified as one of the original practitioners of conceptual art in mid-20th century New York. But during the lecture he repudiated that label. “A question I’m often asked is, ‘Why are you painting? Isn’t conceptual art supposed to be anti-painting?’” he said. “Well, yes and no. Yes, if you are a conceptual artist, and no, if, like me, you aren’t.” Bochner insists that his intention was never to quit traditional compositional devices, but to subject language to the rigors of the material realm. Thus, he stamps, smears, and otherwise degrades linguistic matter, as with “Going Out of Business” (2012), a goopy configuration of synonyms made by applying 750 tons of vertical pressure to oil paint on a velvet ground.

At times, Bochner’s work may resemble a kind of color-infused, tricked-out poetry, but he does not consider himself a poet, as he made clear to the Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine when that publication asked his permission to reprint a series of linguistic compositions. “The editor called me and said, ‘We’d like to do a portfolio of your paintings in color,’” recalled Bochner. “And, I said, ‘OK, that would be great, but I just want to make it clear that what I am doing is not poetry.’ ‘Oh, we think of it as poetry.’ ‘Well, you can’t think of it as poetry.’ ‘Well, it’s kind of like concrete poetry.’ ‘No, it isn’t, I hate concrete poetry.’ ‘Why isn’t it poetry?’ ‘Because I don’t know one poet — except [Stéphane] Mallarmé and Dan Brown — who really cares what the typeface is.’”

Even if Bochner is not a poet, he is engaged in a poetic enterprise insofar as he rearranges his synonym clusters while, in his words, “paying close attention to both sense and sound.” His lecture at Harvard Art Museums included a sustained rumination on linguistic operations (per Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein) and was spiced with gnomic pronouncements by Georges Perec, Steven Pinker, Walter Benjamin, Charlie Chaplin, and Bertolt Brecht. The artist also addressed the coarsening of political discourse and the proliferation of slang, vernacular, and “outright obscenity” in recent editions of *Roget’s Thesaurus*, or “that warehouse of words.”

By marrying high and low, by limning obscenity on a monumental scale, by writing “Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah” on a billboard outside St. Louis, Bochner invariably gets a big laugh. “I’m sometimes asked, ‘Are you trying to be funny?’” he said. “For me, humor is, first of all, a skeptical way of looking at the world From this point of view, the goal of humor is the subversion of certainty.” In other words, a joke is funny because it exposes contradictions, because it undermines “the domination of reason and logic.”

Yet, a joke is also funny when it touches on a basic fact, a simple explanation, lurking behind the drivel, drool, babble, and blabber. The funniest moment of the night came in the final moments, when Bochner said in response to a question about how he developed his signature typography, “My father was a sign-painter. [When I was] a kid, he made me practice.”