

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Interview with Carolyn Cristov-Bakargiev, *Boiler*, October 2003

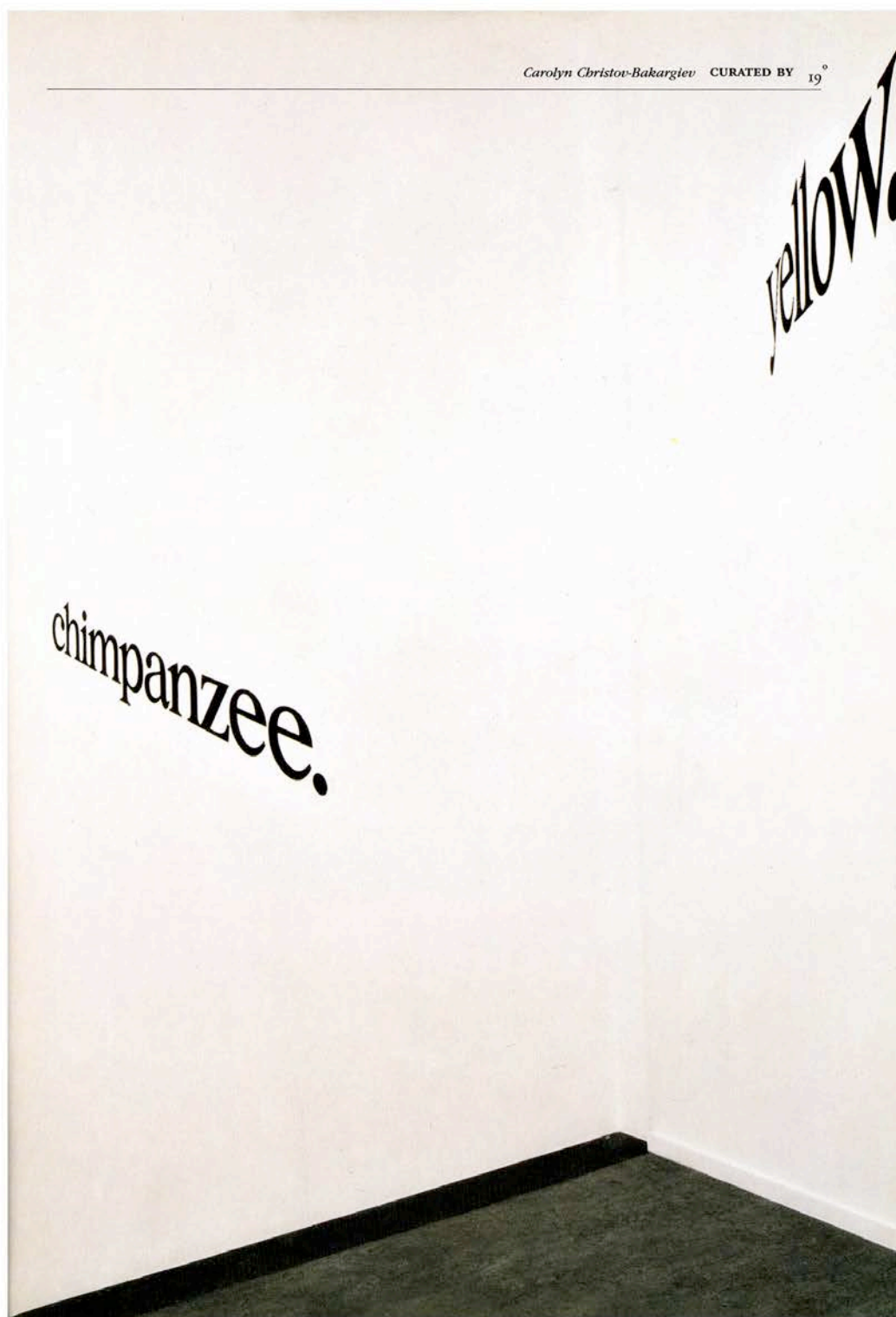
## Boiler

18° Ricci Albenda, *Chimpanzee*, 1998; *Yellow*, 1998, silkscreens

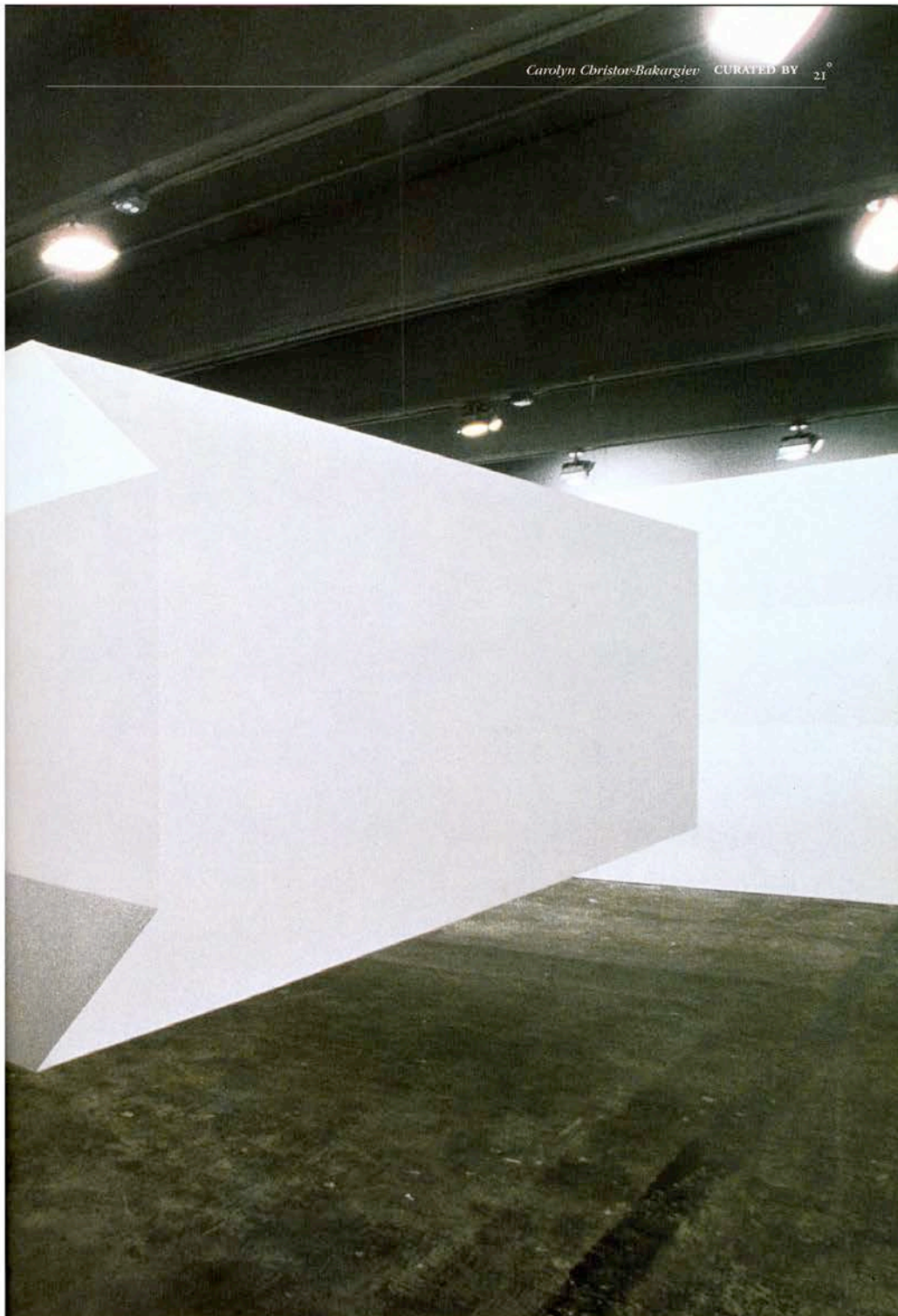
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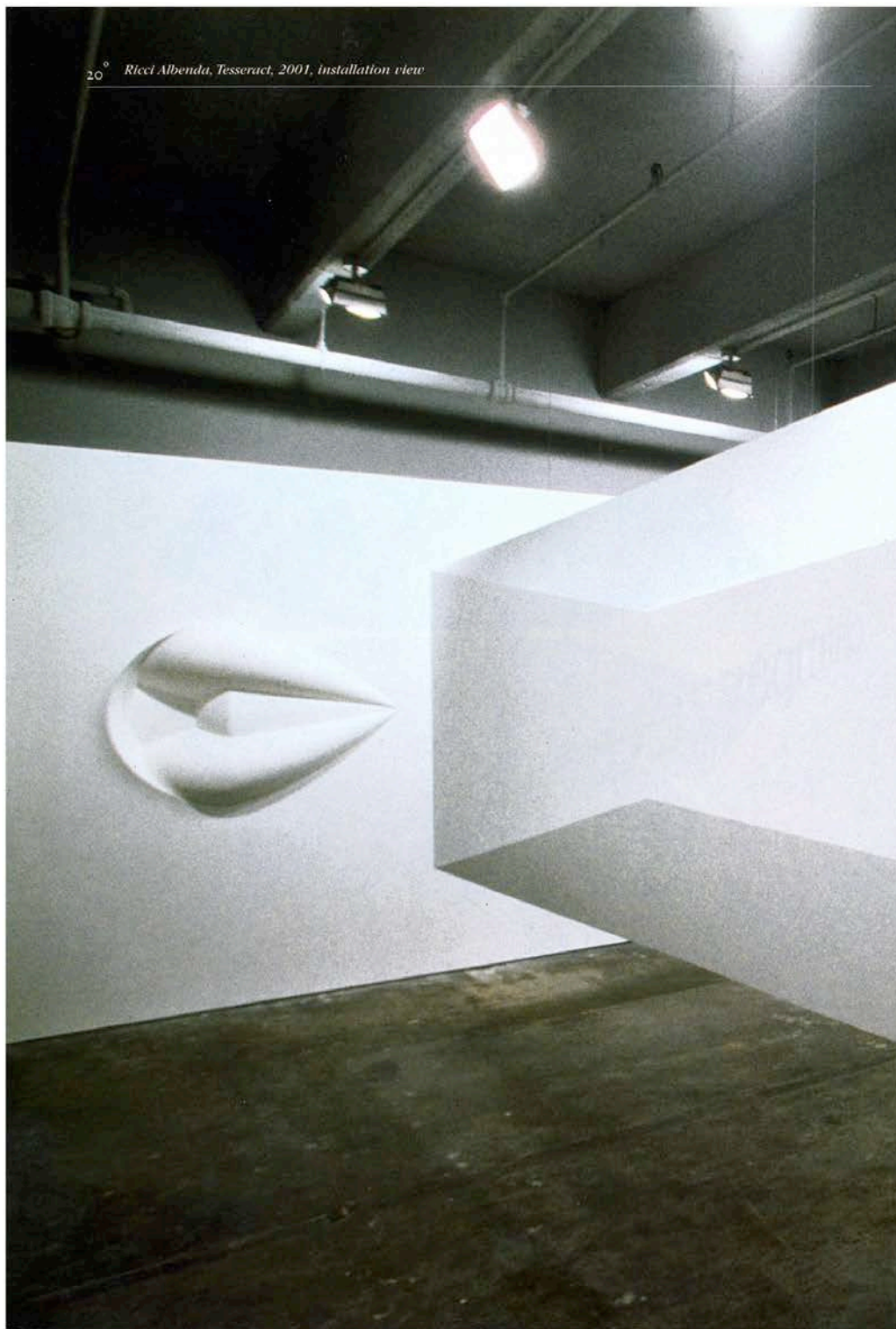


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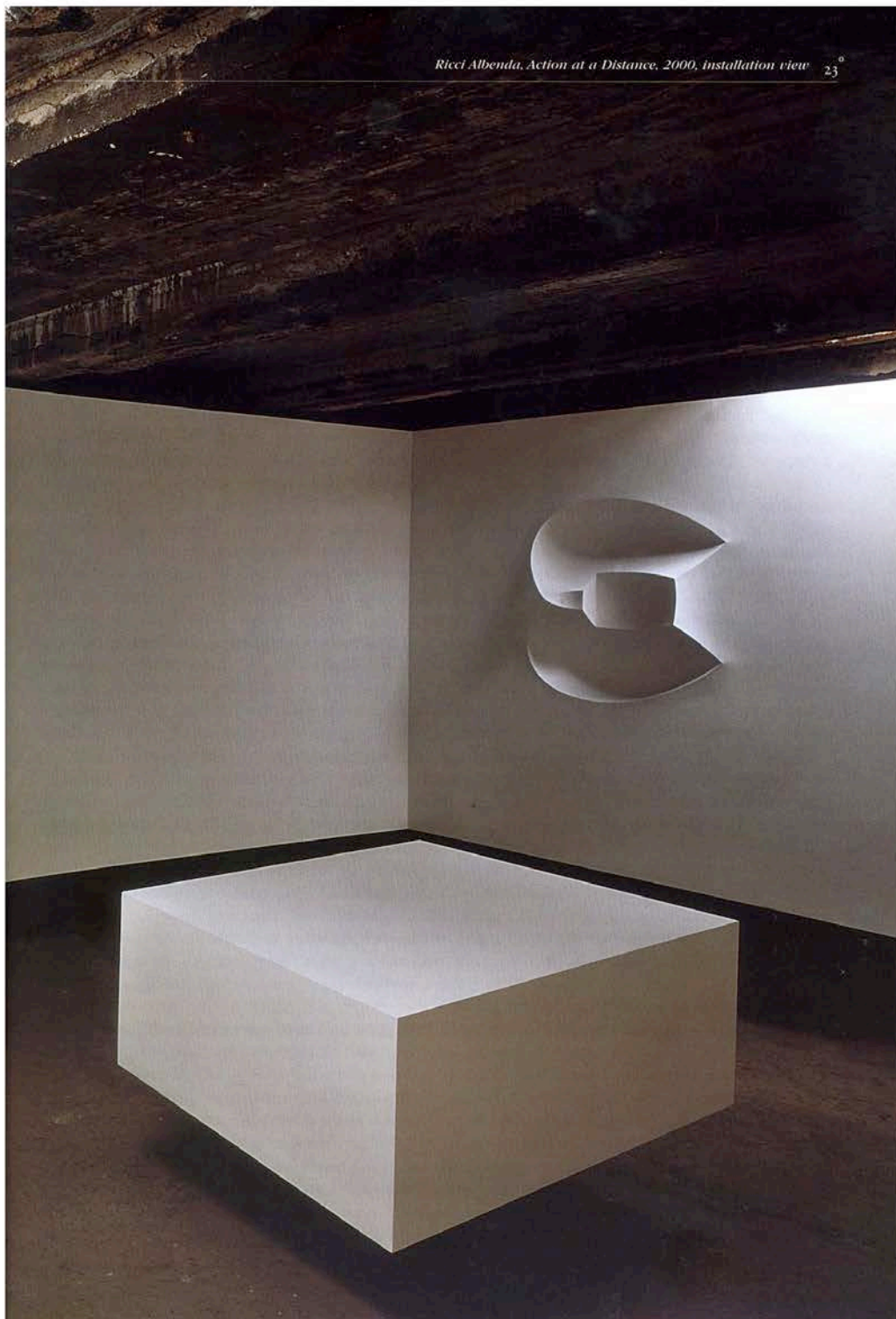




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*Ricei Albenda, Action at a Distance, 2000, installation view* 23<sup>o</sup>

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24 ° EUREKA!

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IN HIS LARGE-SCALE INSTALLATIONS, NEW YORK ARTIST RICCI ALBENDA (B. 1966) CONCEIVES SPACE AS A SCULPTURAL MATERIAL THAT ENABLES HIM TO CREATE PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCES THAT DISORIENTATE AND REORIENT THE PARTICIPANTS. HE HAS MADE THESE DISTORTED 'WHITE CUBE' SPACES IN VARIOUS LOCATIONS, INCLUDING THE BOILER ROOM OF P.S.I CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER, LONG ISLAND CITY (N.Y.) IN 2000 AND AT MOMA (2001). HIS PROCESS OF ART MAKING IS EMPIRICAL, MOVING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN THE PROJECT AND THE REAL, PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF SPACES AS YOU MOVE THROUGH THEM AND PERCEIVE THEM. I ASKED HIM ONE DAY, "DO YOU EVER DREAM THE SKEWED SPACES YOU LATER BUILD? HOW DO YOU THINK THE BRAIN REPRESENTS SPACES IN THE MIND? AND IS MENTAL REPRESENTATION SIMILAR TO WHAT YOUR INTERVENTIONS TRY TO PHYSICALLY ACHIEVE IN REAL SPACE?" THIS IS WHAT HE REPLIED: "A FRIEND SUGGESTED THAT YOUR QUESTION ABOUT DREAMING WAS NOT ABOUT THE KIND OF DREAM YOU HAVE WHEN YOU SLEEP, BUT ABOUT THE IMAGINATION. IF THAT'S TRUE THEN YOU CAN JUST FORGET THE FIRST PARAGRAPH AND START WITH THE SECOND. RICCI".

RICCI ALBENDA: Carolyn, I'm not sure I can really answer your question, though I can certainly give a response. I have never dreamt about the spaces I've created, either before or after. The spaces I create represent ordinary space – in a dream, they would thus be ordinary. It is the gap generated by the abstraction – the relationship between the abstracted three-dimensional reality and the ordinary space it represents – that lends interest to the distortion in the works you are asking about. The 'distortions' I enact, then, are better understood as abstractions. Besides being influenced by concerns that might be termed design affinities, they are generated logically and through a kind of walk-through study (I guess that's what you mean by empirical.)

Models are instrumental, but drawings and simple imagination figure first. This leads me to the closest thing to a direct answer to your question that I have. About the idea of the mental image. I enjoy thinking of the brain's talent for representing space as arising from an accumulation of remembered experience. That is, by seeing space and seeing objects in the context of space the foundations for comprehension are laid. Space is apprehended through the eyes, the hands, and the entire body. You find out what is behind something by walking around to the back of it or by picking it up and spinning it. This may be overly simplistic, but what is important to me is that the memory of all the sensations the body uses to comprehend space are on some level re-enacted when we imagine space – and they are also recalled in the resolution of spatial abstraction. It is the invigoration of this bodily, sensual recall mechanism that inspires me to keep making spatial works – though a very similar (even identical) fascination motivates my word work as well.

**CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV:** *Ricci, what does relate your work with typography and words on walls to your 'spatial' work?*

RA: "How does your work with typography and words on walls relate to your 'spatial' work?" Is this what you mean, Carolyn? If so, in the context of my answer to your first question, my word work is, like the 'spatial' work, akin to a study in cognitive psychology. An investigation into how we perceive – how we create meaning and position a conscious self. Much in the same way as we understand space by remembering our movement through it and re-conjuring the bodily sensations that allow its initial comprehension (or, to take it even further, constitute that comprehension), the act of reading is also an experience that allows introspection into the workings of perception. When we read a word, we recognize a familiar image, which is already imprinted, through memory, and distilled into a kind of ideal form (this idealization also occurs on a smaller scale in the visualization of individual letters and letter combinations). This concept (not to be confused with a word's meaning, but having to do rather with a broader sense of the word as an entity composed of sound, image, meaning, and connotations, universal and personal) is constituted through the accumulation of remembered experience of the word and its letters, and even of similar words, or perhaps specific personal experiences, and is processed on many levels. What it feels like to the tongue and

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Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev CURATED BY 25°

throat muscles to pronounce voiced letters, or to suppress unvoiced letters, as well as all the other complex associations parenthetically mentioned above, confer upon a word not only a substance that far surpasses a dictionary definition, but an illusory essentiality – the impression of an idealized form, almost a platonic form, of every word one is reasonably familiar with. Or, there is a gestalt-like experience of a word. Familiarity even with many letter combinations can allow unfamiliar words to often instantly take on a unique character of their own. This explanation is not so simplistic as the one I threw out for the mental imaging of space. But then space is a bit more homogenous and is thus more difficult to analyse in its minutiae. When I paint a word, I rely on my idealization of it and the hope that it has some level of universality. In a sense, I am trying to find concrete form for an abstract being. In the colored works (from COLOR-I-ME-TRY), I am looking to expand the sensual material for generating word ideals. In the distorted works, I am relying on the universality of my ideal to activate space and to create a dialogue with the spatial constructions or manipulations I'm engaged with. In the more straightforward, undistorted black and white works, I am simply performing an experiment in inter-subjectivity and trying to achieve the greatest congruence between expectations and experience.

It occurs to me here that I've neglected the element of surprise. Perhaps, with the words, the surprise is not directly in the work, but in a revelation the viewer might have about their own mechanism of perception. This sort of surprise is a lot more obvious in resolving the optical illusion of *trompe l'oeil*, but my interest in both is to point to the mechanism of perception, so that the subject of the art is to some extent really the viewer, or more generally, 'humanness'.

**CCB:** *You speak about 'over-simplification' and quite a bit about the bodily experience involved in knowing what's behind an object. Doesn't this 'down to basics' clash with the fact that our contemporary culture seems intent on wanting us to focus on negotiating an indirect knowledge of space – through its mediated representation in news broadcasting, on the Internet, etc.? Why do you think what you do as an artist is relevant today?*

**RA:** That's a very interesting point, and it is amazing how easy it is to lose sight of the obvious when you allow yourself to be 'overly simplistic.' Of course the way we, or at least the way I, understand physical space is hugely informed by mediated experiences of it, especially photography, but all representation of physical space informs an experience of real space, starting with the first representational cave painting. The Internet is a totally different kind of space. It's an interesting space, but my work doesn't relate to it. I'm really not sure that my work is even particularly contemporary. Though my ideas about space and perspective are very related to photography, I think my work is in many ways old-fashioned. My ideas about the viewers' humanness being highlighted by an illumination of their perceptual mechanism are for me a basic tenet of Op art, for example. My interest in words derives largely from advertising, which in its ubiquity is again about space, but also about pop culture. I have a mathematical sensibility that is often read as digital, but I think it might be more appropriately associated with modernist practices.

**CCB:** *You bring the 'abstraction' of ordinary space into the discussion. But what is for you 'ordinary space'? Houses, the subway, the inside of buildings? And do you mean that your 'portals' construct an 'essentialised' version of ordinary reality?*

**RA:** Well, by 'ordinary', I simply mean that all the corners are perpendicular. Without the assumption that architecture is generally composed of perpendiculars, the angles in my wall works would lose their meaning. The portals assume additionally that walls are flat. You might say that essentialised spaces have flat walls and square corners – in this sense I choose essentialised spaces to represent, and I do invent these relatively unremarkable spaces. The abstraction of my portals is based on wide-angle perspective and is in the service of representation, not essentialisation, which is more of a starting point.



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26° EUREKA!

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**CCB:** *When the viewer sees an ovoid shape hovering in a space, and its empty counterpart in a wall nearby (as if it had been removed from the wall) do you want this to seem seamless, as if digitally achieved? Why? Is it about feeling empowered? Is it about the idea that the gaze could do in the real world what characters in digital animation can do on the screen?*

**RA:** Hmm. I do like my work to be what might be called 'seamless'. This is more about perfectionism and visual power than anything else. Like Op art, my work tries to highlight mechanisms of perception. Seamlessness heightens certain visual experiences and illusions. One effect of it, that I haven't yet mentioned, is its relation to scale. I'm interested in ideas of scalesness and of scale based perspective (further=smaller). A seamless, perfect curve doesn't offer points of focus along its edge - this removal of tactile information allows the spatial experience to oscillate. By extension, this seamlessness allows for an oscillation in experience from a concrete presence to a more hallucinatory kind of experience. I can see how this hallucinatory perception could be associated with digital space, though that's not the way I think of it.

**CCB:** *What are you working on right now? How does it develop out of the projects you have already made?*

**RA:** I'm currently working on two large projects. Both have technically been in the works for years, and both have a long way to go before they will be shown anywhere.

The Portals grew out of perspective drawings which were actually more linear. The twists and turns of these 'essentialised' spaces were more labyrinthine than the spaces represented in the portals, kind of like the Universe pieces and unfolded across a long horizontal stretch. I'm working now on a sculptural form that would span the entire length of a wall, strongly referencing a kind of spatial narrative.

The other project is related to COLOR-I-ME-TRY, which I mentioned earlier in passing. It involves generating a colorisation system for the alphabet which represents the entire spectrum but is actually comprised of a very limited palette. It is a perceptual challenge and experiment which I'm counting on to deliver a powerful revelation of my perceptual mechanism, and hopefully to provide a similar thrill for others.

*all images courtesy of Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York*