

One Hand Clapping

by [D. Eric Bookhardt](#)

Some will find it a little dry. In fact, one artist's work bothered an art critic so much that he tried to make a spectacle of the artist by running a big photo of him and then proceeding to give him a grade-school dressing down in print for the sin of showing work that didn't conform to his idea of "art." But that may make the wrong assumptions about what art really is. Art that we don't personally like can succeed (or fail) on its own terms. The question is what, and how valid, are those terms?

Raw Data is a survey of local conceptual art of an unusually minimal sort, work based on low-key alpha-numeric or mass-media ephemera as opposed to, say, Damien Hirst's giant tiger sharks in formaldehyde. Anti-theatrical in tone, some of this reminded me of Samuel Beckett, who said "Writing is not about something, writing *is* that something." He meant fiction, not journalism, but he could have been talking about visual art because his words summarize the basis of modern abstraction, as opposed to representation. Conceptual art takes abstraction one step further by emphasizing mental concepts over visual aesthetic conventions.

For Bob Tannen, the concepts date back 40 years. Growing up in mid-century Manhattan, he was influenced by Fluxus, the famous performance group, whose members once included John Cage and Red Grooms. Fluxus featured a dadaist sensibility with Zen overtones, which also describes Tannen's 1963 opus, *Comma*, a 200-page book composed entirely of commas and occasional typos. This is very "Cagey," using commas and typos the way Cage used silence and noise. *A New Calendar for a New Year (2004)* features days denoted in multiples of 12 next to the usual numbers, so the last day in December was either the 30th or the 372nd (the number of a.m. or p.m. hours in the month). Not content to just think outside the box, Tannen dices the box into digits that question whether the box ever really existed. In the 1960s, that would have been radical. The question now is what that means to a world already so digitalized that even we may not really exist.

Stephen Sollins employs similar methods in his *Elegy Series*, junk-store tapestries stripped to bare outlines with the colored threads recycled into centrally placed box graphs proportionally representing the original color content. These look contrived, presumably on purpose. In a related series, some business graphs appear embroidered on handkerchiefs, and again one wonders if this latter-day dadaism hasn't come full circle, back to realism. After all, handkerchiefs with embroidered corporate graphs sound like a potentially profitable enterprise.

For Joan Kay, the concept is hurricanes, which serve as the basis for her abstract paintings, where the size and placement of tape and paint are based on the longitude, latitude and force of the storm, so the hurricane's outcome determines the outcome of the painting. Colors are decided intuitively, and her sculpture follows similar rules. Kay's pieces look more like "art" than most, being both decorative and anti-decorative, embracing and mocking modernism while employing nature as an ally.

Also somewhat artful are John Davis' *White Out Paintings*, collages of old comic strip panels with the sequences scrambled, and the dialogue bubbles whited out. Distinctive yet incoherent, these provide the satisfaction of letting us devise our own imaginary dialogue. They may also succeed as pop art, which never had to be coherent. In art, context is everything, and here Matthew Sontheimer might pass for a romantic, although his zig-zaggy ink on paper drawings can suggest printouts from malfunctioning seismographs or the errant oscillations of severe coronary fibrillation. In fact, he says they are excerpts from his journal written in various esoteric codes that he concocted. The surprise is that works such as *Unforeseen Fortune Cookie* -- a blue ink maze of jagged lines like a contour map of the Patagonian foothills with secret messages concealed in them -- somehow come out looking personal, delicate, even precious, at least compared to most of the other stuff in this unusually cerebral and impersonal show. *Raw Data* is to New Orleans art what plain raw broccoli is to Creole cuisine, something so alien that it might almost seem exotic, despite -- or maybe *because* of -- its lack of sensual gratification.