

# KAY ROSEN'S LACAN

*The letter is in the real and the signifier is in the symbolic.*

–Jacques Lacan, Seminar XVIII, May 12, 1971

*The interest of the work lies here, where the absence, presence, rearrangement or alteration of these small units [the primary components of language: letters and space] disturbs linguistic sequence, revealing patterns and systems that exceed and outperform their expected function.*

–Kay Rosen, "B(coming) A(part)," 1993

The basic context for reading Rosen's work is essentially as follows: a woman, emerging in the 1970s (think feminism, linguistics, post-structuralism, pop, minimalism, conceptual art), paints smallish images of language. I will not elaborate on this much further; it is easy to trace the trajectory that goes from Pop to Ruscha to Rosen as well as the political connotation of many of the artist's chosen "word plays." Instead, I will use a possible misreading of Lacan's "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud" to articulate Rosen's basic working methodology.

Rosen's work, as with any "good" work, proposes an alternative system of reading.

Reading and/or interpreting a text—or a body of work—is very much like doing analysis and as we know, criticism is in many ways a contemporary form of autobiography.

Every language is an alphabet of symbols, the employment of which assumes a past shared by its interlocutors. Rosen, however, creates a new genealogy, a new way of interpreting this past. Her primary concern is the microstructure of language, which is another way of saying that her work centers on "the letter." The letter is a specific place within a word, a place that may be temporarily occupied by a variety of different phonemes. Another possible working definition of the letter is that it is the differential element that separates two words. In Rosen's work, it is the letter that is responsible for the meaning-making function or effect.

Letters or characters (meaning the roles letters play as they dress up in different types) can only be combined in predetermined ways in any given language in order to convey a commonly understood meaning. It is in this sense that Lacan defines the letter as

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"the material medium [*support*] that concrete discourse borrows from language " and "the essentially localized structure of the signifier." What Lacan means by "the letter" is perhaps what he in a later seminar famously refers to as the "materiality of the signifier." The Lacanian "letter" (as is the case with Rosen's) has no proper meaning; it is directional: *Le sens de la lettre* (as is Lacan's original French title of Section I of the essay) indicates a *sens*, not of meaning but of directionality; of subversion, a subversion of the place of meaning itself. For Lacan, there is no reciprocal determination between signified and signifier. He goes on to assert that "the signifier does not serve the function of representing the signified." For Lacan, it is the signifier that dominates the signified. This illuminates the mutability of meaning in language by privileging the materiality of the word, the letter, over both the sound image—the signifier—and the mental picture—the signified.

In accordance with the artist's statement quoted above, Rosen's works "exceed and outperform [the signifier's] expected function." Both Lacan's and Rosen's signifiers behave badly; they do not respect boundaries. In the artist's work this is achieved primarily through three (often simultaneous) strategies:

1. Rosen's particular use of lettering puts the shifting relationship between signifier and signified on display. Title, size, color, and type seem to come to the signified's aid. A *sui generis* mode of spelling and/or organizing words (stacking, sequencing) force new (often humorous) meaning through linguistic gaps left vacant by design.
2. There is a distinct auditory quality to Rosen's work. The materiality in Rosen's "signifiers" are located not only in the painted surface but in the impression or stamp of the sound of listening to ourselves decode. Rosen renders not merely the color and form of the material text but also foregrounds and makes physical the voice in which we speak to ourselves when we read.
3. Rosen's "writing" style is performative, not demonstrative. Some words seem to want to enact what they mean, and Rosen's canvases and wall paintings function as thoroughly considered stage designs. Rosen's "words" could be thought of as performing in drag. By restaging the Lacanian letter, she exaggerates and distorts and, to some extent, caricatures its dominant relationship to the signified.