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*Archives of American Art*

## **Mel Casas papers: Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1988-1989**

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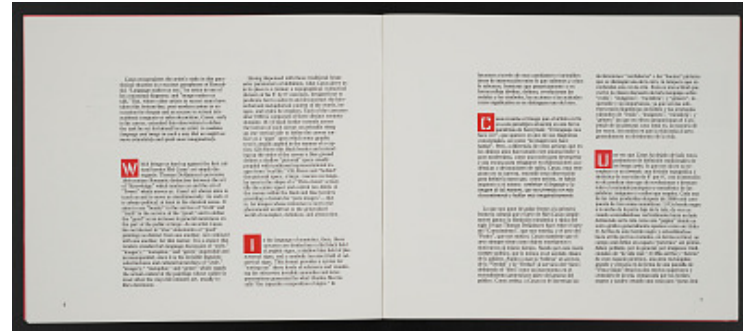
Casas encapsulates the artist's stake in this paradoxical situation in a succinct paraphrase of Korzybski: "Language makes us see," he notes in one of his conceptual diagrams, and "image makes us talk." But, where other artists in recent years have taken this bottom-line, post-modern axiom as an occasion for despair and an excuse to retreat into academic exegesis or salon decoration, Casas, early in his career, extended this observation to define the task he set for himself as an artist: to combine language and image in such a way that we might see more articulately and speak more imaginatively.

Which brings us hard up against the first cultural border Mel Casas' art simply disregards: Thomas DeQuincey's pervasive 19th-century Romantic distinction between the art of "Knowledge" which teaches us and the art of "Power" which moves us. Casas' art always aims to teach us and move us simultaneously. As such, it is always political, at least in the classical sense. It aims to use "beauty" in the service of the "good," and to define the "good" as an increase in general awareness on the part of the public at large. As an artist Casas has no interest in "true" statements or "good" paintings as distinct from one another, nor confused with one another, for that matter. It is a stance that renders standard art-language discussion of "style," "imagery," "metaphor," and "genre" inoperable and inconsequential, since it is the invisible linguistic substructures and cultural hierarchies of "style," "imagery," "metaphor," and "genre" which supply the actual content of the paintings whose subject is most often the ways life imitates art, usually to life's detriment.

Having dispensed with these traditional beaux artes parameters of definition, what Casas gives us in its place is a format, a topographical, syntactical division of his 6' by 8' canvases, designed not to predicate but to subvert and deconstruct the hierarchal and metaphorical content of the words, images, and styles he employs. Each of the canvases after 1968 is composed of three distinct semiotic domains: (1) A black border extends across the bottom of each canvas occasionally rising up on vertical side to define the canvas surface as a "page" upon which some graphic text is usually applied in the manner of a caption. (2) Above this black border and extending up the sides of the canvas a blue ground defines a shallow "pictorial" space usually peopled with traditional representational images from "real life." (3) Above and "behind" this pictorial space, a large, concave rectangular area in the shape of a "Vista-vision" screen fills the entire upper and central two-thirds of the canvas within the black and blue borders providing a domain for "pure images" — that is, for images whose reference is not to the phenomenal world but to the generalized world of metaphor, definition, and abstraction.

In the language of semiotics, then, these canvases are divided into a flat black field of graphic signs, a shallow blue field of phenomenal signs, and a symbolic (no-size) field of categorical signs. This format provides a syntax for "sorting out" these levels of reference and visualizing the otherwise invisible anomalies and interpenetrations generated by what Charles Morris calls "the tripartite composition of signs." In

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hacemos a través de esas cambiantes e inestables áreas de intersección entre lo que sabemos y cómo lo sabemos, fronteras que perpetuamente y en forma refleja dividen, definen, revolucionan las señales y los símbolos, las acciones y las actitudes cuyos significados no se distinguen uno del otro.

Casas resume el riesgo que el artista corre en esta paradójica situación en una breve parafrásis de Korzybski: "El lenguaje nos hace ver", que aparece en uno de sus diagramas conceptuales, así como "la imagen nos hace hablar". Pero, a diferencia de otros artistas que en los últimos años han tomado este axioma límite y post-modernista, como una razón para desesperar y una excusa para refugiarse en elaboraciones académicas o decoraciones de salón, Casa, muy temprano en su carrera, extendió esta observación para definir la tarea que, como artista, se había impuesto a sí mismo: combinar el lenguaje y la imagen de tal manera, que nos permita ver más elocuentemente y hablar más imaginativamente.

Lo que nos pone de golpe frente a la primera frontera cultural que el arte de Mel Casas simplemente ignora: la distinción romántica y típica del siglo 19 que Thomas DeQuincey hace entre el arte del "Conocimiento", que nos enseña, y el arte del "Poder", que nos motiva. Casas mantiene que el arte siempre tiene como objeto enseñarnos y motivarnos al mismo tiempo. Siendo por esta razón siempre político, por lo menos en el sentido clásico de la palabra. Aspira a usar la "belleza" al servicio de la "Verdad" y la "Verdad" al servicio del "bien", definiendo el "bien" como un incremento en el entendimiento general por parte del grueso del público. Como artista, a Casas no le interesan las declaraciones "verdaderas" o las "buenas" pinturas que se distinguen una de la otra, ni tampoco que se confundan una con la otra. Esta es una actitud que vuelve la clásica discusión del arte-lenguaje sobre "estilo", "imágenes", "metáfora", y "género", inoperable y sin importancia, ya que son las subestructuras lingüísticas invisibles y las jerarquías culturales de "estilo", "imágenes", "metáfora", y "género" las que en efecto proporcionan el Contenido de las pinturas cuyo tema es, la mayoría de las veces, los modos en que la vida imita al arte, generalmente en detrimento de la vida.

Una vez que Casas ha dejado de lado estos parámetros de definición tradicionales de los beaux arts, lo que nos da en su reemplazo es un formato, una división topográfica y sintáctica de sus telas de 6' por 8', con la intención no de predicar sino que de revolucionar y desmantelar el contenido jerárquico y metafórico de las palabras, imágenes y estilos que emplea. Cada una de las telas producidas después de 1968 está compuesta de tres zonas semióticas: 1) UN borde negro a lo ancho de la parte baja de la tela, de vez en cuando extendiéndose verticalmente hacia un lado definiendo así la tela como una "página" donde un texto gráfico generalmente aparece como un título. 2) Arriba de este borde negro y extendiéndose hacia arriba por los costados, en forma vertical, un campo azul define un espacio "pictórico" sin profundidad, poblado, por lo general, por imágenes tradicionales de "la vida real." 3) Más arriba y "detrás" de este espacio pictórico, una área rectangular, grande y cóncava en la forma de una pantalla de "Vista-visión" llena los dos tercios superiores y centrales de la tela, enmarcada por los bordes negros y azules creando una zona para "puras imá-



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