

september 4 to
october 11, 2008

Public Program: oct. 2, 6-9pm with
jem cohen
melissa rachleff burtt
luc sante
harley spiller

apexart
291 church street new york, ny 10013
t: 212.431.5270 f: 646.827.2487
info@apexart.org www.apexart.org

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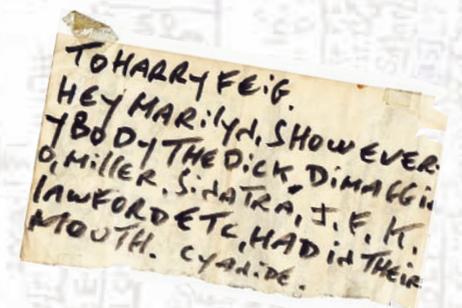
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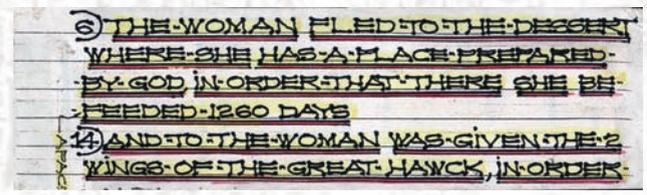
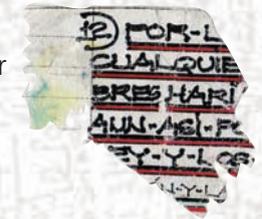
scrawl



This collection began on a cloudy afternoon in 1985, when I strolled up Broadway and a cryptic note flickered in the corner of my eye. A few minutes later, regretting that I had not read it completely, I circled back to the bizarre message. Barely clinging to its Times Square lamppost, the weathered page, related to JFK conspiracy theory, was easy to remove. It has proven infinitely more difficult to decipher.

The statements contained in SCRAWL are often political, biblical, sexual, and/or psychological. They can be impeccably drafted in unique calligraphy or scribbled in unintelligible palimpsests. Ordinarily, the notes are all I have to parse, but once in a while I've bumped into "street authors." In 1995 I saw my first, a lady dressed in black, the hellish noir of years of unwashed clothing. She was vigorously wiping an entire glue stick on a patch of brick. I continued watching from a distance as she posted her proclamation above busy Church Street. I'd seen the same ornamental writing before, but had only been able to snag a torn fragment. After she finished pasting, the lady wandered off, looking back over her shoulder from time to time. I waited long minutes before crossing the street. The glue was still wet. This time I got the entire text, along with a serious case of the heebie-jeebies.

It was six years before I spotted another scrawler, a hefty middle-aged man standing on the sidewalk in front of Zabar's, meekly distributing elaborate and mysterious hand-cut messages (as seen in the background of this brochure). I could make neither head nor tail of his curious scramble



of English and Hebrew letters, symbols, and more, so I dared ask "What's it all about?" "They're pictures not sounds so I don't talk about 'em," he murmured, turning back to leafleting.

What's stronger, the visual, the verbal, or some combination thereof? SCRAWL is rarely plain text or pure image, so what is it exactly? I'm not sure, but reading Rilke helps a little: "...try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers... Live the questions now."¹

OK Herr Rilke, I'm trying. Are the jam-packed pages of SCRAWL a result of horror-vacui (the fear of empty space)? Are these outbursts stirred by oppressive feelings that there's not enough room for what needs saying? Why isn't everyone interested in these "visual equivalent(s) of overheard whispers"?² What features does SCRAWL share with hieratic texts like Ethiopia's healing scrolls, believed to be powered by the forces at the intersection of medicine, perception and aesthetics? SCRAWL can, as one critic described, seem like "the incandescence of true psychosis ... a black hole of absolute spiritual density... If most art seeks to express the soul of its maker, here you have the soul itself, scorched onto the very paper with psychotic force."³ One thing's certain, SCRAWL haunts.

It's simpler to describe what the collection isn't, than to peg what it is. Scrawl is not:

- G-rated;
- Begging / Ingratiating;
- Thoroughly comprehensible;
- Literature, Music, Painting;
- Outsider, Naive, Brut, or Fine Art;
- Graffiti (here the law usually disagrees);
- Profit-driven advertising;
- A small-town phenomenon;
- The first thing I tell strangers about.