

Wall, Window or Bar Signs (12-Step)

by Joseph del Pesco

1. For the exhibition *Wall, Window or Bar Signs*, Mungo Thomson presents his first neon artworks for a project informed by the proximity of Kadist's venue to Bruce Nauman's former San Francisco studio. While here in 1967, Nauman made some of his first neons, including *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (Window or Wall Sign). This spiraling neon was prompted by a commercial beer sign already hanging in the window of Nauman's studio, a space that had previously been a grocery.

2. Unlike most artists at the time, Nauman chose to work with neon in a way that preserved its commercial context but reinvented its content. Hanging his own sign in the window of his studio, and radically altering its tone of voice, he delivered a quixotic micro-manifesto for artists. UC Berkeley curator Constance Lewallen noted that Nauman was interested in a form of "art that was supposed to not look like art." In order to speak obliquely, without the hang-ups of the rarefied aesthetic of art, Nauman appropriated the commercial sign as kind of camouflage. This initial act of borrowing, and referencing mass culture, can be understood as a generalizable strategy employed by artists today.

3. In 1999, while an MFA student at UCLA, Thomson claimed Nauman's famous phrase for a 3' long holographic vinyl bumper sticker modeled on 12-step and recovery program merchandise ("Easy Does It," "One Day at a Time," "Let Go and Let God"). Fascinated by the public display of private struggle, Thomson distributed the sticker among students, artists and friends. By adhering it to their car windows or bumpers, they assumed membership in an alternate but related version of a dysfunctional and cultish subculture: that of the artist.

4. For his exhibition at Kadist, Thomson inverts his own bumper sticker work, attending to the form rather than the content of Nauman's iconic neon while retaining some of its pseudo-spiritual vernacular. Instead of a personal statement, however, Thomson appropriates existing slogans and philosophical sound-bites from 12-Step and self-help literature. By borrowing heavily from groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, Thomson points back to the beer sign in Nauman's studio.

5. The phrases selected for Thomson's neons range from the generally motivational or affirming ("As you go through life make this your goal, watch the donut not the hole") to those that could be referencing the making and exhibiting of art ("I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody") to those that refer to the spiral form itself ("If you can read this call my sponsor"). The exhibition includes only six spiraled phrases, but hundreds more appear in the publication, suggesting that the possibilities are nearly infinite.

6. Designed by Jon Sueda/Stripe SF, the publication closely resembles what in AA circles is commonly referred to as "The Big Book." Serving as the primary reference for recovering addicts, the book contains an accumulation of wisdom that has accrued over many revisions. Printed in a limited edition of 100, Thomson's version of *The Big Book* is reinvented as an artist book. Serving as an additional work in the exhibition, rather than an index or catalog, one might imagine its role as a primary reference for the exhibition's larger proposition.

7. The authorless aphorisms and motivational mantras selected by Thomson address symptoms common to the behavior of the artist and the recovering addict: lifetime commitment and daily fortitude, compulsion and control, anxiety and regret, egomania and delusion, competition and resentment, and the hope of ultimate fulfillment of one's individual vision within a network of support and common thought. The project adapts the banners, in-on-it phrases, and testimonials of membership of one subculture for use by another.

8. Does the neon spiral suggest the 'downward spiral' of addiction? The phrases emerge from the center, suggesting an outward expansion, rather than receding inward, toward a space of compression (or perhaps oblivion). So while they don't appear to be moving "downward," the vertiginous reading of each phrase leads our minds and bodies to contort, as if under the influence. The spiral form follows an ancient and organic mark that was also a trope of contemporary art in the late 60s. One need only be reminded of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* conceived in 1969, just two years after Nauman's spiral.

9. Working closely with Oakland based neon fabricator, Shawna Peterson, who has been in conversation with Jacob Fishman (a Chicago-based neon fabricator/conservator for Nauman neons) Thomson has retained a particular fidelity to art historical precedent. Using the letterforms in the original *Mystic Truths* spiral as reference, designer Jon Sueda worked with typographer James Edmondson to produce an entire font alphabet for the publication, and a template for the neons.

10. There is another typeface in the exhibition: Nauman's own script. While living in New York, Thomson (having moved there to participate in the Whitney Independent Study Program) worked on the install crew for Robert Storr's BRUCE NAUMAN retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1995. After the show was installed, Nauman signed the catalog for Thomson, thanking him for his involvement. The signature is recreated here in blue neon, representing Thomson's informal entanglement with Nauman. This brief interaction complicates notions of collaboration, consent, and authorship.

11. While this exhibition represents Kadist San Francisco's largest commission with an individual artist to date, it has humbler beginnings. The conversation that led to this exhibition began with the "glass-half-full" neon, of which there are two included in the exhibition. Echoing the martini-glass neon sign commonly found in bar windows in San Francisco and Los Angeles, the glass-half-full uses the same ellipses that give shape to the base and rim of the martini. The contour lines between rim and base are reconfigured from martini to pint glass, adding an additional ellipse to mark the half way line. Further establishing the connection to the culture of addiction, and the neon sign as beacon of temptation, these neons suggest an unwritten aphorism about how one perceives life in general—half full or half empty.

12. Los Angeles-based artist Mungo Thomson's material and visual language both critiques the utopian legacy of the 60s and 70s, and carries forward California Conceptualism's irreverence as it collides with the noise and pathology of mass culture. Combining anxiety and humor, refined materials and inelegant subcultures, phenomenology and cultural mediation, it pairs the sublime and aspirational with consequence and degradation, the party with the hangover.