

Levente Sulyok

Dynamism of Forms and Pathways of Desire



Activations and Con(texts): Cultural Defamiliarizations in the Art of Levente Sulyok

An Essay by Dr. Royce W. Smith
Assistant Professor, Modern & Contemporary Art History
Wichita State University



Levente Sulyok
Significant Double II, 2010
acrylic on canvas
60 x 108 inches

The wonderful thing about language
is that it promotes its own
oblivion...

Maurice Merleau-Ponty
The Phenomenology of Perception, 1962

As Ed Ruscha considered the impacts of Pop Art and its intersections with the textual and conceptual strands of contemporary practice, he often noted his works' ability to straddle the often-contradictory worlds of appearance and meaning or definition.¹ Challenging the formalistic beliefs that text imposes a certain logic or structure to experience and narrative, Ruscha embraced the ambiguous subtexts of language and their equally variable contexts in the age of postmodernism. His memorable work, *Hollywood* (1968), for example, exemplifies what Ruscha envisioned as a transmogrification of the text into a picture and back again—"Hollywood" serving up cozy associations with movie stars and sit-coms and the word itself serving as the linguistic *punctum* for 1960s-era glitz and glamour.² Later works, such as Ruscha's 2009 painting, *History Kids*, create an interplay of landscape and text, in which the legibility of mountainous terrain obfuscates the text and its ability to mean consistently—a mirroring of how the contemporary viewer processes information in concomitant states of completeness and lack. If Ruscha's work extended the Popist project of both showcasing and deconstructing the superficiality of an increasingly commercialized everyday, Levente Sulyok pulls back on those reins and encourages viewers to dwell

with an everydayness that his practice further splinters, fragments, re-contextualizes, and de-familiarizes. Sulyok's stable of materials—from acrylic paints to banal sound recordings, from totemic stacks of boxes to boxes of unseen manifestoes—maps a constellation of influences that both palpably and imperceptibly affect the order and constitution of our contemporary world.

Sulyok's paintings are meticulous exercises in careful color choice, layering, abstraction, and meaning-making—the technical elements that constitute his work serving as a language that Sulyok sees as not all that dissimilar from the everyday vernacular. His fluid washes and often-noticeable brushstrokes and drips pay homage to abstraction, but it is his interest in popular culture and his ability to abstract that, too, that makes his pieces so compelling. *Significant Double* (2010) exudes a microscopic, inverted focus on two "O's" from the Hollywood sign that so interested Ruscha, but Sulyok's meditation is far less

literal—instead allowing his deconstruction of familiar text to lead back to the formal essences of line, color, and shape. Similarly, Sulyok's *COLLAPSE* (2010) yet again relies on written text as the conduit into the painterly—what Ian Burn might have described as a work that "leaves an impression of 'reading' my seeing and 'seeing' my reading."³ While artists such as Jasper Johns (in his familiar *O-9*, 1960) relied on superimposition to produce these vacillations between reading and seeing, his work maintained a rigid flatness that was anchored in the structural nature of the numerical. On the other hand, in *COLLAPSE*, Sulyok's layers of blacks, atop sherbet-like pinks and oranges, establish tensions of depth that

cooly ponder the effects of the three-dimensionalization of both seeing and reading. Beyond superimpositions of letters, Sulyok's alphabetical inversions in *Significant Double II* (2010) further challenge the conventions of and vacillations between seeing and reading. As the text asserts its primacy in an unexpected right-to-left fashion, its quirky orientation must also be reconciled with a seemingly purposeless grid that buttresses the array of letters and a gloomy landscape that seems almost antithetical to the work's conceptual foundations. As such, the work creates playful exchanges between text and form, flatness and depth, place and placelessness, that challenge the fixity and predictability of meaning.

It is such conversance between two- and three-dimensional works that illustrates Sulyok's interests in the relationship between what Osip Brik calls the "easel-artist" (stereotyped as a bourgeois individualist) and the production artist (who is interested in the productive effects of making on culture and social well-being).⁴ For instance, while the grid has usually served in recent art history and theory as the modernist, Cartesian system that "states the autonomy of the realm of art,"⁵ Sulyok's works collectively question that system as it is translated



Levente Sulyok
Translation, 2009
acrylic on canvas
48 x 48 inches

from two- to three-dimensionality and back again. As grids seemingly order abstract representation and demarcate utopian or dream-like environments in works, such as *Translation* (2010), Sulyok also employs them to reference and concretize the banality of everyday detritus—sometimes allowing objects to exist in their state of unadulterated rawness, sometimes veneering them with fragile, yet seductive, surfaces of sticky tape polished to modernist perfection, sometimes al-

lowing grids to expose the superficiality of contemporary DIY culture as one sees with his dissected Ikea LACK table in *Now•here* (2010). Sulyok's strongest assault on the grid surfaces in *Surplus*, where the grid-as-cubical-structure leans with the precariousness of a Tatlin architecture—supported only by a glued column of hole-punched credit card offers at its top and an unopened box of unwanted (irrelevant?) Marxist writings at its base. The unseen—or one might surmise, the unheeded—text serves as the physical and conceptual foundation of environment, place, and representation—a facet of Sulyok's work that informs not only artistic questions, but also the very essence of a contemporary life based on un contemplated venture, excess, and waste.

Just as Vladimir Tatlin looked at art and



Levente Sulyok
Significant Double, 2010
acrylic on canvas
60 x 108 inches



materialism as the basis for the “construction of standards for new experience,”⁶ Sulyok meditates here on the complex relationships between identity, language, and materialism—all of which have the concomitant ability to fulfill, alter, or destroy human desires. In the end, like Tatlin’s 1919-1920 *Monument to the Third International* (a fantastical structure never built but emblematic of human ambition and struggle), Sulyok’s art balances a matter-of-factness with the carefree nature of dreams—dreams unfortunately contingent on a world that does not always support them. □

NOTES

¹ Ed Ruscha in Thomas Beller, “Ed Ruscha,” (1989); also in “Leave Any Information at the Signal,” pp. 281–85.

² Ed Ruscha in Lisa Pasquariello, “Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used,” in *October 111* (Winter 2005): p. 95.

³ Ian Burn & Mel Ramsden, “The Role of Language,” in *Art in Theory: 1900 – 2000*, ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood. London: Blackwell, 2003: p. 891-893.

⁴ Osip Brik, “From Picture to Calico-Print,” in *Art in Theory*, pp. 348-352.

⁵ Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” in *October 9* (Summer 1979): pp. 50-64.

⁶ Vladimir Tatlin, “Report of the Section for Material Culture’s Research Work for 1924,” in *Art in Theory*, pp. 352-353.

Levente Sulyok, *Genealogies: Conversions, Subversions and Perversions*, 2010 (top left, with detail above); recycled plexiglass and wood, paint, cardboard boxes, modified LACK Ikea table and various types of adhesive tape; dimensions variable

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front cover image:

Levente Sulyok, *COLLAPSE*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 68 x 60 inches



Levente Sulyok, *Surplus*, 2010 (detail, above); recycled wood, paint, 44 surplus copies of the *Communist Manifesto* and 2 surplus copies of *Capital* by Marx (boxed), and hole-punched credit card offers; dimensions variable