

Complementary Space
Andrew Smaldone "On Words"

The first thing artists Lyall Harris and Patricia Silva will tell you about their collaboration is that they are surprised that the work looks like it was made by one person. The reason this comment from them shouldn't be unexpected is simply due to the fact that both artists have their own practices and, therefore, their artwork is conceptually and stylistically different from one another. In fact even their subject matter and approach to work varies considerably. So why, one might ask, has their collaboration together been so successful? They will give you a number of personal and professional reasons why they enjoy working together. And such reasons are of course very important. Yet surely the primary reason they continue to work together is that there is a space between them - a space that is not easily defined - where art is created, where the creative act is played out in ways that both stimulate and engage the artists.

This creative area could be likened to a sort of non space. But what is curious about this non space is that plenty of guidelines and frameworks exist within it. So it is like an area with a set of rules that allows freedom and creativity to flourish. One could call them guidelines or frameworks but the artists call them "constraints" for the process, which include time and materials. What is further and worth considering at length is their approach to the form of the book. A book's form can be likened to the familiarity that exists regarding a rectangular or square painting in that it is a form that everyone recognizes. We see a rectangle with pages and know it's a book just as we see a stretched canvas with paint and know it's a painting.

In this sense Harris and Silva have intelligently chosen not to avoid tradition and force themselves to pursue a sort of expanded field for books category. What they are doing through their constraints is allowing a book to be art and art to be a book whether the art looks like a book or a "book" or a game. It's worth drawing another painting analogy to elaborate on my point: as everyone knows, Piet Mondrian painted naturalist tree paintings before his famous abstract grid paintings made up of whites, grays, blacks and primary colors. Yet the paintings whether representational or abstract were always about divine proportions. The way Harris and Silva work both conceptually and stylistically resembles this Mondrian situation because their work is rooted in the centuries old idea of the book, so even when the artists venture into a form that no longer resembles the book, there is still the whatness of bookness that positively filters through.

When speaking with the artists it is clear that they are enthusiastic about what they are doing. They have already spent two years making twelve projects. What is emerging, as a result, is the desire not simply to continue a process that has been successful for the simple reason that there was success but rather to keep making art together based on feeling and inspiration. It's silly to think that art comes about in a vacuum of thoughts disconnected to feelings. And in Harris and Silva's work we see a wealth of influences and subject matter that are connected to politics, aesthetics, life, art, history, popular culture, pattern and even bits and bobs that pop up in their daily lives and are therefore perfect content for use in a new project. The artists show us things that we already know yet have never seen in these new configurations, and it is in the everydayness of these new configurations in the work where their power lies. Ultimately, by showing us the intimacies of their world, they give viewers a nudge to reflect on what things mean and by doing so make the small details of life fascinating.

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