

Gaga is pleased to present an exhibition of new work by Antek Walczak, on view from March 30 through May 11, 2012.

For “The Lead Years” at Gaga the New York-based artist Antek Walczak presents 8 lead silkscreens consisting of texts, link addresses, and malicious code from spam emails circa 2007. The prints are made on 98.783% metallurgical sheet lead primed with a hand-applied vinegar wash. Once mounted on wooden frames, they become metallic dull gray panels that take the shape of paintings. The works draw on numerous associations with lead and its properties, chief among them being toxicity, in the scientific sense of the term and as well referring to certain financial assets, mortgage products, and even psychological-emotional moods. Coupled with spam, toxicity gains the capability of contagion, as thousands of emails flood people’s inboxes with simulated personal messages carrying payloads of scams, cons, and viruses. The predominance of stock and refinancing spams in the years leading up to the Global Financial Crisis further underpins the toxicity of a period which some markets have referred to as the Golden Years.

Known for its malleability and the way it reacts to organic chemicals, lead harbors a dazzling murkiness, permanently recording on its surface every scratch and impression, whether from its inherent nonuniform structure, a careless fingerprint, or a deliberate gesture during the priming process. These qualities are put in relation to the aforementioned metaphoric and symbolic associations as elements of montage. The works’ picturesque graphical referents, with very obvious, straightforward origins, are manipulated by the artist into crisp visual compositions with faint echoes of constructivism, which are then printed over the neo-Dada chance and process actions inscribed on the support material. What results is a type of abstract writing conjugated as an image, free from the literary trappings of discourse that seem to adorn much of contemporary serious art. With a weakness for wagers and gamesmanship, Walczak challenges the sealed-off circuitry and art-historical attachment of Networked Abstract Painting by risking a dialectical openness towards the actuality of information, culture, and knowledge.

The technique of montage is important to Antek Walczak’s work and practice. Having been educated in film, with a succinct body of videos behind him, he favors the dynamic generative effects of montage over the tight inertia of collage. Indeed, he finds his influences in the intellectual montage pioneered in Soviet cinema by modern masters such as Eisenstein and Vertov more than in the phlegmatic irony of Broodthaers or Duchamp. More concerned with creating critical pictures than performing critical positions, as an artist making art objects, Antek has been trying to explode the statement-form of conceptualizing inherited from industrial mass media and modern advertising,

a certainly impossible task fraught with pitfalls and disappointments. Along the way, as a sort of methodology and protocol, he repeatedly questions and pushes the relationship of language and text in post-conceptual, post-Internet artistic practice. This he does precisely by constraining ideas to the limits of objects and materials, binding the spirit of thought to the world instead of subjugating the world to thought's whims, dependencies, and drives.

Alchemy was once the art of turning shit into gold, of taking one of the poor, heavy metals and transforming it into something higher, more noble. It is now a dead art, and as the global supply of lead mined from ore is running out, recycling must pick up the slack in order to keep up with the growing demand for car batteries, bullets, and radiation shields. The same occurs on the level of ideas in the current political mire and economic encumbrance of a system steeped in the customary repression and repercussions that made Years of Lead happen in the late 60s and 70s to Italy, Argentina, Germany and France. The ancient Roman economy of lead could afford to mistake

the silent, anxious work of its neurotoxins for a hangover extracting its earnings from the labors of overindulgence, or chalk it all up to the indiscriminate and divine caprices of madness. Today, there is only Caput Mortuum—the burnt-out dead head—left over after thousands of years of refinement involving experiments, operations, and discoveries. What remains is to gather this residue for archival purposes, file it in the dead gray domains of the Internet. What hope then is there for imagination when faced with such weight, what faith can there be in the magical properties of turning spam into high art (the highest art that the market calls for)?

There yet may be a formula to further reduce barren matter and life into some useful subatomic quintessence. The alchemical symbol for lead is the same as for the planet Saturn. Saturn: the scythe is its symbol - god of Saturdays and agriculture, the ruling planet of Capricorn. Master of limitation, restrictions, boundaries, practicality and reality, crystallizing, and structures. Saturn governs ambition, career, authority and hierarchy, and conforming social structures. The great malefic planet. As a Capricorn with Libra in ascendance, Antek Walczak knows all too well his sad, morose and cold leaden aspects, which is why in his search for a modern-day philosopher's Stone, he will someday need to confront the feelings, beauty and enthusiasm of Venus, mother of Libra, whose symbol denotes copper.

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