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REVIEWS & PRESS

Marjorie Welish & James Siena. *Oaths? Questions?* Granary Books, 2009.



Richard, Frances. "Tactical Antagonisms: Marjorie Welish and James Siena collaborate on a book." *Art on Paper* 14.2 (November/December 2009): 23-26.

The first page of *Oaths? Questions?*—a collaboration between Marjorie Welish and James Siena—is blank, but not empty. There is nothing on it, but rather something in it, a postage stamp—size transparency set in the thick, folded paper. The image is captioned, so we know it reproduces a painting called *The High Valley 19* (1983–4) executed in oil on canvas and measuring a room-size 6 by 8 feet. A close look reveals an image divided in four. The left-hand quadrants are tessellated in yellows and ochers above and white and red below, while the right-hand quadrants are a multicolored crazy quilt; those familiar with the collaborating artists will recognize the work as Welish's.

This close looking must be accomplished in the act of turning the page, since light shines through the tiny slide only when the stiff leaf is upright. By foregrounding the radical scale shifts that printing can accomplish, as well as the in-between moment when neither recto nor verso fills the visual field, *The High Valley 19* draws the viewer optically, cognitively, and also bodily into the space of the book. On the next page—actually on an overleaf of clear Mylar—the first words to appear in *Oaths? Questions?* ratify the insistence that looking and/or reading is not simple: "AND IT WENT BLIND."

Ten full-bleed, double-page linear and geometric abstractions follow, all in more or less primary colors and all made specifically for the project. Each spread is interleaved with clear films on to which are letterpressed poetic passages by Siena and Welish—who worked separately, for two years, in response to each other's prompts. The exchange evolved from an invitation to Welish by Steve Clay at Granary Books. Writer/artist collaborations are a Granary specialty, and as Welish is both, she could have been her own interlocutor. Instead, she invited Siena, stipulating that he also write. "I immediately understood . . . the tactical headspace that he and I share," she explained in a public conversation hosted by *artonpaper* at the Editions|Artists' Books Fair last November, before the book was completed. "I was searching for, in a way, the proper

antagonist, one with whom I would share a mentality, but with whom I wouldn't necessarily share the same thought-process in the specifics." The upshot of these tactical antagonisms is a study in what Siena calls "doing and undoing," in which reading, looking, page-turning, and pattern-tracking interlock in an almost musical dynamic. Syncopated by not-quite algorithms, in *Oaths? Questions?* text and image, transparency and substrate come together and peel apart, their interactions rule-bound but always just a smidgen off the beat.

The beat or baseline is the grid. As painters, Welish and Siena are both committed to recursive systems sensualized by small disruptions—as simple yet intense as the freehand tremble in a line (Siena) or the degree of inequality where angles touch (Welish). No attributions are provided, but even an uninitiated viewer will feel two personalities at work. Siena's line is inquiring and snaky, Welish's tape-straight and declarative. His palette is lighter and warmer, with white space functioning importantly; her hard-edged shapes are self-problematizing—a rigorous passage will dribble away midthought—and her figure/ground relationships are denser. So this, it seems, is what Welish means by distinguishing "mentality" from "thought-process." Both artists take *Oaths? Questions?* as an opportunity for working through obsessions with (ir)regularity and repetition, and the difference between their solutions is a meta-instance of differences that compose the book—between letter and shape, rationalized lattice and intuitive scribble, thin-clear and thick-opaque material. Oaths affirm or curse, and questions open or destabilize. This makes for yet another tactical antagonism, wherein Welish swears the oath and Siena poses the question—or vice versa. Siena's writing is funny, concise, a tad voluptuous:

shattering
the map of Manhattan
mending
the map of Paris

or

looking at an ear
touching an eye
tasting a nose

Welish, as is her habit as a poet, explores two verbal moods. Incremental shifts that in her images might off-rhyme reds/yellows/blues appear in words as connotative and sonic variations:

IF CREASED
expel
INCREASED
OR IF CRUSHED AGHAST

Elsewhere, she skids or glides sideways into jokes that remain nearly mathematical in their mutations:

“I’ll get over it.” “I’ll get over it,”
The man said, on missing his train.

[...]

On missing his train,
the man said, “I’ll get on it. ON IT!”
Meaning, “I’m all over it,
like white on rice.”

This particular text pairs with a Siena page vertically striped in narrow lines of red, blue, green, yellow, and black on white. The words “ON IT!” and “white” on their Mylar fall precisely on white space (as do “oaths? questions?” elsewhere). The careful registration punches up key moments of legibility while emphasizing language as a plastic material building the book-as-object; literalizing the prepositional perversity of man and train, for example, the clear sheet has printing on it but lies over the image. Siena’s parallel lines could even read as railroad tracks or Parisian or Manhattan avenues—but:

“A likely story,” she said,
meaning, “not so fast.”

A final, all-Siena page realizes “doing and undoing” in a grid of twelve little drawings that deconstruct a linear composition layer by layer, answering the transparency of Welsh’s *The High Valley 19*. Thus, how to parse layering—i.e., what it’s like inside the moment when attention passes through one layer to rest upon another—emerges as the query and avowal of *Oaths? Questions?* On the opening text page—where Welsh declares “AND IT WENT BLIND”—there appears the word “HINTERGLASMALEREI.” It translates as “behind glass painting.” Of course, the book (which was printed in an edition of fifty by Ruth Lingen of Pace Editions and bound by Daniel E. Kelm and Kylin Lee at Wide Awake Garage) contains no glass. But it does have a clear plexi slipcase, the glassy Mylar, the introductory slide, and the sequential overlays implied by Siena’s closing lesson in spatial relations. Each becomes a support for painting, and what floats across these surprisingly see-through planes is language. Lift the film off the paper, and the viewing surface shifts from gloss to matte; a colored reflection flickers on the shiny sheath; the print, for all its complexity, seems simplified or stripped as writing sheers away and the viewer feels a rush, as if light intensified; a diminution, as if intensity dropped. There is a slight, synesthetic sense of audioclarification, as if one voice phased out and another sharpened. It’s not easy to make words and images interact this way, and it could only happen in a book.

Original URL: artonpaper.com/bi/v14n02/speaking_volumes.php

