

# RAIN AT SPORTS

contemporary art talk

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## MALL SQUATTERS, WORD HIJACKERS AND LIFE HACKERS AT GALLERY 400

by Claudine Isé



Michael Ruglio-Misurell, *Project #12*.

On the surface, you wouldn't necessarily think that a fake shopping mall disaster area courtesy of Michael Ruglio-Misurell, a somewhat spare solo show of text-based drawings by Kay Rosen, and a rotating group video program addressing the subject of individual artistic agency would have so much to say to one another. Yet in many ways, the accrual of meaning from one show to the next makes Gallery 400's current exhibition lineup work even better as a whole than each show does separately. All three exhibitions in one way or another address the making and unmaking of worlds, whether by choice or consequence. Ruglio-Misurell's *Project #12* is an all-encompassing environment of found junk put together in a manner that evokes a shopping mall eatery that's been abandoned by consumers and taken over by squatters. Evidence of human efforts to make this disaster zone habitable, if not functional, abounds. Amidst the rubble, there are signs of human intervention and pathetic

forms of "making do": a makeshift tent/sleeping area, plastic trays linked together to form temporary walls and, perhaps, zones of privacy. Who is making use of the food court? Vagrants? Crackheads? Teenagers looking for a covert place to fuck?

To be sure, *Project #12* evokes a certain economic timeliness, given the U.S.' current climate of consumer reticence coupled with the whole dead mall phenomenon. Recalling the sculpted chaos of Tomoko Takahashi's or Jason Rhodes' discard landscapes and perhaps to some degree Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe's more recent Black Acid Co-Op crack-den environment at Deitch Projects, Ruglio-Misurell's installation speaks to the uses to which people put "dead" commercial spaces after the latter's primary functions have been economically effaced. Yet one would be hard-pressed to find anything joyful, much less Utopian, in Ruglio-Misurell's apocalyptic vision, despite those discrete moments of sculptural clarity that the artist inserts into the chaos. No, *Project #12* evokes the desperation of Katrina-like scenarios, where individuals, abandoned by the State in one form or another, are left to rot in their own filth and fend entirely for themselves.



Michael Ruglio-Misurell, *Project #12*.



Michael Ruglio-Misurell, *Project #12*.

In contrast to the in-your-face spectacle of Ruglio-Misurell's disaster zone, Kay Rosen's show is quiet and almost withdrawn (for this artist, anyway, whose text paintings can be billboard-bold in their effects). The walls are sparsely hung, the show consisting of a rarely-seen video shown on a small flat screen monitor, a collection of collage pieces housed in a glass vitrine, another smallish collage and a collection of altered book covers from mystery writer Sue Grafton's bestselling Alphabet Mysteries in which letters spelling out the word 'hijacked' have been excised.



Kay Rosen at Gallery 400.



Kay Rosen, *I Left Right in the Middle*.

Rosen's sly wordplay is always a delight to engage, especially when she makes you work at getting the joke. (I'm embarrassed to admit I still haven't figured out how the missing letters from her *Hijacked* collage actually spell out the word "hijacked," though I'm sure it's staring me right in the face). The works chosen for this show are meant to provide material for a fall drawing class at UIC led by Julia Fish that explores the play between text and image, which, of course, is Rosen's specialty. The works here are small in scale and unflashy, emphasizing the readerly aspects of Rosen's approach over her (often less engaging) descents into one-liner territory (as in works like this one, a postcard piece which isn't in this exhibition).

Rosen's work is quite literally about reading between the lines, and it's filled with sweet little epiphanies for word-nerds like myself. Yet Rosen's work goes beyond those little moments to say something much larger about the role of language in shaping our world. We don't have to search far and wide for alternatives to the status quo, her works seem to argue. They're already there, everywhere around us, we just need to be willing take a few liberties with the governing text—"small shifts in perception," as Anthony Elms puts it in his essay on Rosen's show—to see the way out.

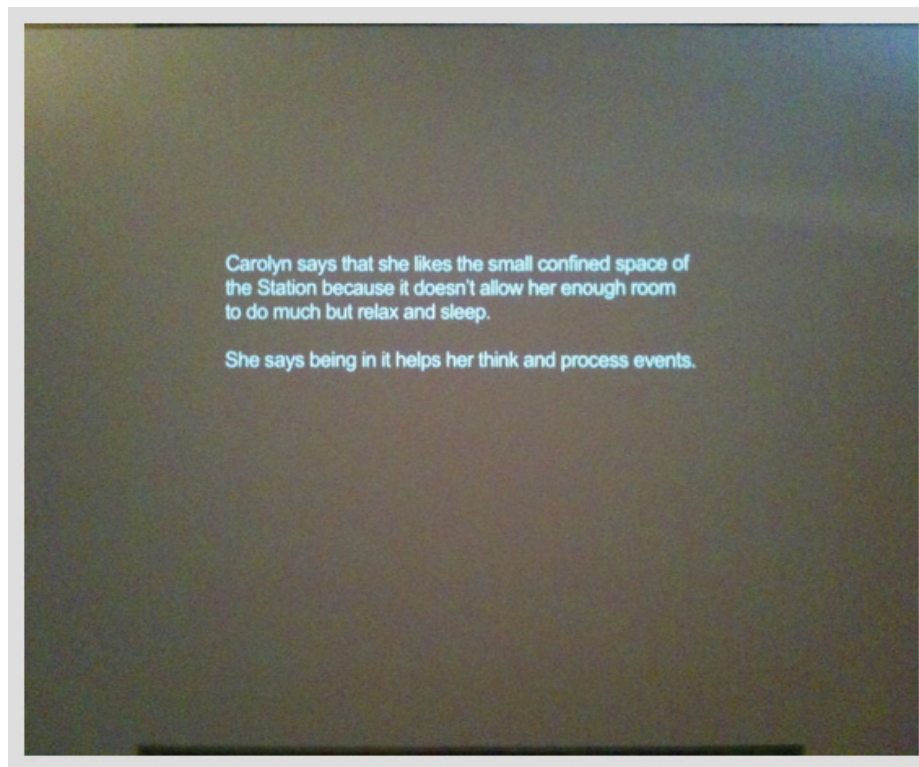
I visited all of these shows twice, both times on a Friday, the day when Andrea Zittel's *Little Liberties* is the featured video (other artists in the video program include Phyllis Baldino, Alex Hubbard, Glenn Ligon and Patricia Esquivias). No doubt the juxtaposition of Zittel's work with the others colored my impression of the three shows' overall coherency, but I suspect that, given the video program's overarching focus on artistic agency, any of the other rotating works would have resonated with the nearby shows in equally eye-opening ways. I've seen numerous examples of Zittel's "designs for living" before, but always in museum or gallery settings that frankly tended to kill much of their impact for me. All of Zittel's work is geared towards the goal of self-sufficiency via the design, fabrication and use of structures, systems and practices that bypass or simply slip through the cracks of dominant systems. To the extent that it's possible, Zittel tries to live "off the grid," and *Small Liberties*, a video that takes the form of a textually narrated slideshow, provides a rather straightforward introduction to Zittel's work and the ideas about sustainability and independence that guide her practice.





Andrea Zittel, still from *Small Liberties*.

It's a silent piece, consisting of a series of photographs and short narrative vignettes about the people who have purchased Zittel's *A-Z Wagon Stations*—custom built units that are a cross between a covered wagon and an air stream trailer for those seeking a space of contemplation and creativity that's entirely their own.



The idea of “small liberties” neatly encapsulates the essential pragmatism that characterizes Zittel’s approach to everyday life and to social change. It’s not radical with a capital R (though it must certainly look peculiar to some)—it’s more of an incremental, “little r” radicalism that seeks not to coerce or co-opt opinion but simply to be left to one’s own devices. Whereas I imagine the invisible inhabitants of Ruglio-Misurell’s trashed food court are there because they have nowhere else to go—the State, as it were, has abandoned them—Zittel’s community of A–Z Wagoneers are bucking the system by choice. They want to carve out a space where the State leaves them pretty much alone (or at least, that’s the stance they are affecting). If this trio of shows works on you in the way they did me, you’ll leave slightly more convinced that these small moments of resistance are in fact where some of our most powerful choices lie.