



THE NEXT 7 DAYS: EVENTS (17) + OPENINGS (9) + DEADLINES (20) + CLOSINGS (20)

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TORONTO
TERENCE DICK
 SIGN, SIGN, EVERYWHERE A SIGN AT THE JUSTINA M. BARNICKE GALLERY |
 STORE/FRONTS | FACADES AT MOCCA
 February 17, 2015



Like 9

Having graduated in the early nineties with a degree in Semiotics, the Five Man Electrical Band song *Signs* has a special place in my heart (though I must admit I first heard it sung by Tesla, which was definitely not cool). The refrain "Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?" basically sums up any ideological analysis I was exposed to in those heady days when everything was a text and every response a critique. Not surprisingly, the exhibition that borrows its title from said song and is currently on view at my alma mater's newly united downtown galleries (the **Justina M. Barnicke Gallery** and the **U of T Art Centre**) dips into a selection of that era's visual art as well as stretching into the past of street (sign) photography and into the present's unanchored embrace of signs of signs as signs.



Ken Lum, *Untitled (Language Painting)*, 1987, oil, enamel on board

The slippage happened just before I made it into academia and is represented here with works by **Ken Lum**, **General Idea**, **Carl Beam**, and **Ian Carr-Harris**. There is a burden of history weighing their signs down – the gravity of colonialism, globalization, AIDS, and postmodernism – that isn't felt in younger artists like **Haldey + Maxwell** and **Luis Jacob**. **Kelly Mark**'s video of protestors with blank signs demanding "NOTHING!" pretty well sums up the shift to our endless present and **Will Kwan**'s flags of burning flags sourced through the internet makes one last ditch attempt to link signs to real things but any real world meaning is lost in the pixels. What would Ferdinand de Saussure do? Luckily, the free floating chain of images allows for parallel narratives, ones less tied to the past and the old familiar values that generated us and oppressed us. As the song goes, those signs are "breakin' my mind" and sometimes that can be a good thing. The singer ends up making his own little sign and that's what the artists have done here.

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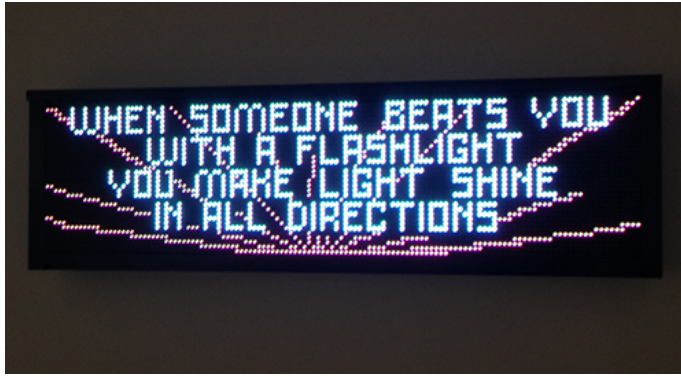
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Jenny Holzer, *UNEX Sign No. 2* (selections from "The Survival Series"), 1983-84 (reconstructed 2010), LED display

Jenny Holzer, patron saint of Semiotics Departments everywhere (their office doors would be incomplete without one of her oblique exhortations stuck there on a postcard) is one of three artists in the current edition of the **Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art's** ongoing series of National Gallery-backed mini-exhibitions. This one, titled *Store/Fronts | Façades*, has been tailor-made to offset the giddy embrace of consumer culture in the adjacent Douglas Coupland survey show (more on that later, once I've had a chance to see its other parts at the ROM and Daniel Faria Gallery). Holzer's LED display flashes a series of bilingual (is this a requirement for our capital's collection?) statements that are echoed by Coupland's *Slogans for the 21st Century* but possess a critical edge that would be more at home in *Sign, sign, everywhere a sign*.

Josephine Meckseper and **Vicky Alexander** maintain the shopper's scepticism as they delve into the dystopia of mall culture. The former contributes a shaky Handicam tour of the Mall of America colour-coded beneath tints of red, white and blue that culminates in a visit to the army recruiting centre that sits amidst the clothing stores. The parallel is somewhat heavy-handed and the execution somewhat crummy, so I prefer Alexander's photos of the West Edmonton Mall because they feel more authentic to my experience of consumer culture. They're fragmented and lack a centre, incomplete and kind of shitty, and emphasize the kind of shittiness of a mall (which always wrestles with its own inevitable decay). The ideals being sold are refracted in so many mirrors and glass surfaces that it's impossible to even locate the fountain (or wave pool or whatever) at the centre. You just keep circling around among the surfaces. Or maybe I read too much Baudrillard back in the day and he ruined shopping for me forever.

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery: <http://www.jmbgallery.ca/exhibitions.html>

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign continues until March 7.

Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art: <http://www.mocca.ca/>

Store/Fronts | Façades continues until April 19.

Terence Dick is a freelance writer living in Toronto. His art criticism has appeared in *Canadian Art*, *BorderCrossings*, *Prefix Photo*, *Camera Austria*, *Fuse*, *Mix*, *C Magazine*, *Azure*, and *The Globe and Mail*. He is the editor of *Akimblog*. You can follow his quickie reviews and art news announcements on Twitter [@TerenceDick](https://twitter.com/TerenceDick).

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