

*In a conversation with Judith Russi Kirshner, recorded May 5, 2017, artists Tony Tasset and Kay Rosen discuss the group of Chicago artists called neo-conceptual and how the Midwest shaped their work.*

**Judith Russi Kirshner:** Let's begin with early experiences in Chicago.

**Tony Tasset:** I went to a little school—the Art Academy of Cincinnati-- with Judy Ledgerwood and Gregory Green. Judy was a year ahead of me. She went to SAIC for graduate school. I chased her to Chicago. I wasn't accepted to SAIC my first try so I went to Northwestern for a semester and studied with Ed Paschke. Ed was great but SAIC was the dream. I got into SAIC on my second try and studied painting with Ray Yoshida, Phil Hanson and others. This was the '80s, and Rhona Hoffman and Donald Young were showing Sol Lewitt and Cindy Sherman at their gallery. Hudson, who Judy and I knew from Cincinnati opened *Feature* (gallery) in 1984 and he brought Charles Ray, Raymond Pettibon and Louise Lawler to Chicago. It felt like it was a very specific time that signaled an important shift away from the Imagist work that had dominated Chicago. Although I loved much of the Imagist's work, I saw it as primarily a regional movement and I recognized the art world becoming increasingly global. Me and some buddies--Judy, Jeanne Dunning, Gaylen Gerber, Mitchell Kane, Hirsch Perlman and Peter Taub--set out to distinguish ourselves from regionalism. I met the art critic Kathryn Hixson in an art history class you taught, Judith. There were lots of exhibitions, discussions and Kathryn was also a big part of the scene. She wrote for the *New Art Examiner*, and also *Arts Magazine* and *Flash Art*. We had a kill-the-father moment. Some critics called us Neo-Conceptual.

Between my first and second year of graduate school at SAIC, I was in a summer show called "Post-Conceptual Pop Production" that Rhona curated with Hudson. Eventually Robin Lockett opened a Gallery and along with Feature a new paradigm was set in Chicago. Eventually Feature moved to New York, Robin closed and a bunch of the artists left town. It was a lot of fun for a couple of years anyway.

**Kay Rosen:** I moved to the Midwest from the south to attend grad school at Northwestern. My academic background was in languages and linguistics, not art, but after teaching for a few years, I realized what most interested me about language had to be expressed visually. So I left academia and started over as a "self-taught" artist from square one. I took a few classes at SAIC and that opened up a whole new world. I joined Feature in the early 80's and had my first show there in 1984, with Gregory Green. I showed a multi-paneled Plexiglas and Masonite work titled *No Noose Is Good Noose*.

**JRK:** Hudson was an important personality and influential figure in Chicago's art world.

**KR:** He really changed things. In the '70s, the Imagists were dominant in Chicago and the alternative galleries—the two women's galleries [ARC and Artemisia] and N.A.M.E.—broke things open at the same time. In the '80s, Randolph Street Gallery opened and at Feature Hudson showed a group of new Chicago artists, including budding writers like David Sedaris and the art critic Kathy Hixson who coined the term New-Conceptual, plus artists from the east and west coasts—Raymond Pettibon, Charlie Ray, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Koons. As Tony mentioned, Feature provided a community.

**JRK:** What characterized the work you made here?

**TT:** Trying to identify how Chicago has impacted my art is like trying to analyze myself. I've only ever lived in the Midwest, so I don't have any comparisons. But Chicago certainly has impacted me in specific ways. I learned a lot working for Rhona Hoffman as a preparator. And I was fortunate to see firsthand some of Chicago's greatest collections when I was installing work for her clients. One specific ah-ha moment came when I was installing a painting in a home with a Corbu chaise lounge covered with cowhide. This gave me the idea to frame cowhides as paintings. I called them Domesticates. Also, the MCA drew me to Chicago. I remember the Vito Acconci (1980) and Michael Asher (1979) shows in particular. And, finally, Randolph Street Gallery was important. Peter Taub became the director and they had an amazing performance program.

Does that mean the Midwest affected my work? I'm not sure. So many artists affected my work. Post-modern theory was in the air nationally and internationally, and my pieces were art about art. I was thinking about private collections, commodity culture, and cultural heritage. Since the 80s, my work has synthesized familiar tropes of visual culture--blurring the valuable with the valueless. The early work collapsed minimalism and modern painting with furniture design and animal trophies. Now, my stylistic appropriations, often for public commissions, have expanded to include vernacular traditions like snowmen, gigantic roadside attractions, and super-graphic mod paintings.

**KR:** As I was not from the art world, I was less grounded in art history in general and in Chicago in particular. My art grew mostly out of my interest in language systems, with some early detours along the way...systems of movement, for example, and minimalist performers such as Steve Reich, Lucinda Childs, and Trisha Brown. I drew on that as I began an exploration of the intersection of meaning and structure in language through pictorial means: color, materials, scale, composition, typography, and graphic design. Basically, *alternative* functions of language, outside of conventional linguistic orthodoxy.

**JRK:** Some artists based in Chicago have spoken of the importance here of a slower pace, and the ability to have a studio practice as well as support a conventional life-style.

**TT:** That's what they say in Terre Haute, Indiana too. They say it's fantastic being an artist there because you have all this free time to work.

**KR:** Ha Ha. That's true. Although I'm based outside of Chicago, in Gary, Indiana, even more remote). However, I'm probably more involved with New York than the Midwest, and I've been fortunate to be represented by galleries in London, Milan, Paris, and Berlin.

**TT:** In the mid-80s, when I was 24, Hirsch Perlman introduced me to Christine Burgin who was opening a gallery in New York and she bought everything in my studio. But I also showed with Kuhlenschmidt in California and Karsten Schubert in London. It felt like the art world was becoming global and that you didn't have to move to New York.

**JRK:** What about today? How important is it to live and work in New York?

**TT:** I think it's less and less important to live in New York. Everyone is so mobile, jet setting around the world. When I was young regionalism felt like a parochial prison. Now it feels like a welcome reprieve from hyper connectedness, comforting like farm to table restaurants.

**KR:** I believe that one can live anywhere—as evidenced by the many artists who live in far-flung places—as long as they have representation in a large art centers like New York or L.A. I've always felt that there is a regional bias that is hard for artists to overcome without that assist. Throw in other obstacles (gender, age, ethnicity, etc.) and the challenges increase. The many wonderful artists in places like Chicago outweigh the support structures for them. I've witnessed it among former students for twenty-five years. It's why Hudson moved to New York in 1988.

**JRK:** During the same period the Renaissance Society was influential in showing work from all over, including Chicago.

**TT:** Yes, the Ren did a great job of incorporating local artists into an international dialogue.

**JRK:** What we are witnessing now is an interest in the regional as a marker of authenticity of place. More and more Chicago artists of an older generation are finding gallery representation. The Prada Foundation in Milan is doing an Imagist show as part of a program of exhibitions on overlooked artists. There is something positive about fresh perspectives and new artists coming to the city.

**KR:** I guess this is related to a *fetishization* of the historic, in which individual artists who have been overlooked for years are being rediscovered. The things motivating this trend could be the subject of a whole other discussion...

**JRK:** I see this question of the global and the local as related to your practice, Kay. Working in language provides a universal means of how we understand the world, yet your texts are very vernacular.

**KR:** There are cultural associations in the work but non-English speakers somehow access them. And since they're typically succinct—one or two words, they can also be looked up easily in a dictionary. Language is an agreed-upon contract among users and currently the contract exists across many platforms and borders.

**TT:** Kay, how do you think your work is seen in relation to Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer?

**KR:** My work has run parallel to those artists but wasn't influenced by them. I came to art via other, non-art paths as I described before.

**JRK:** We began with your recollections of Chicago in the 80's. How has your practice and work changed over the years?

**TT:** It's tough for a Midwesterner to brag, but I do believe Kay, Jeanne, Gaylen, Judy, Hirsch, Mitchell, Joe, me and a few others were born as artists during a pivotal change in the Chicago art landscape, around '84, '85. The plurality, the global outreach and the ability to have an international career while based here started in those fun years.

I'm a product of the 80's. Although my art today may look very different from my earlier work, the philosophy behind it has not changed much. Modernism failed, the constant desire for the new in art is a death drive. Post-Modernism allowed me to create within the culture's existing signs. I appropriate and synthesize common languages. In my early work, I appropriated the signs of modern art and furniture. Today I've expanded my repertoire to include vernacular sculpture, folk art, and late modern decoration.

I love getting up in the morning and deciding if I want to be a pop artist, an abstract expressionist, a folk artist, or a surrealist. I love that freedom. I've viewed the art world from many angles. I share Duchamp's skepticism. Since the eighties until now I've questioned how value is assigned in art. One of the bridges postmodernism broke down was between art and popular culture. My large scale public sculptures like *Eye*, *Deer*, and *Rainbow* speak to a wide audience.

**KR:** My approach to language--an ongoing exploration of its verbal architecture--hasn't changed much since the 80's, but my *public* practice has become more prominent as institutional and public venues have sought to install it, either temporarily or permanently, as murals, banners, or billboards. The main difference between the large works and the more intimate works on canvas or paper is the 'volume.' The public works carry messages that need to be writ large - and loud - due to their social or political content. It is interesting to me that some of the most distinctly *American* works. like *Blurred* or *New Orleans*

2005 (about Katrina), are in collections abroad. Perhaps they represent universal issues that exceed regionalism. Things are more interconnected and global than ever, and the audience that consumes art, specialized or not, is tuned in. At the March for Science in the spring of 2017, protesters in both Germany and D.C. carried a downloadable sign I made about global warming. The challenge these public texts face is to present a message that is accessible to large numbers of people from all walks of life, not only museum visitors, without compromising the work. People are accustomed to reading signs, so the leap from commercial signs to *art* signs isn't huge. They might just require a bit more thought.