

Already a Winner

you may already be a winner

Spam series: you may already be a winner (Henrietta, June 11, 2007 9:24:24 AM EDT), 2008. Single piece of aluminum foil, 2 x 108 x 2 in.

A Conversation with

Rachel Perry Welty

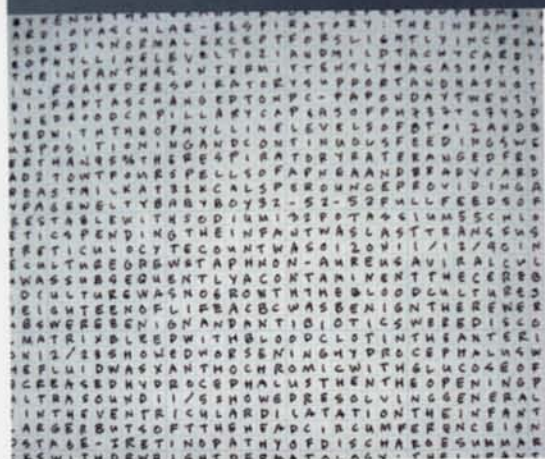
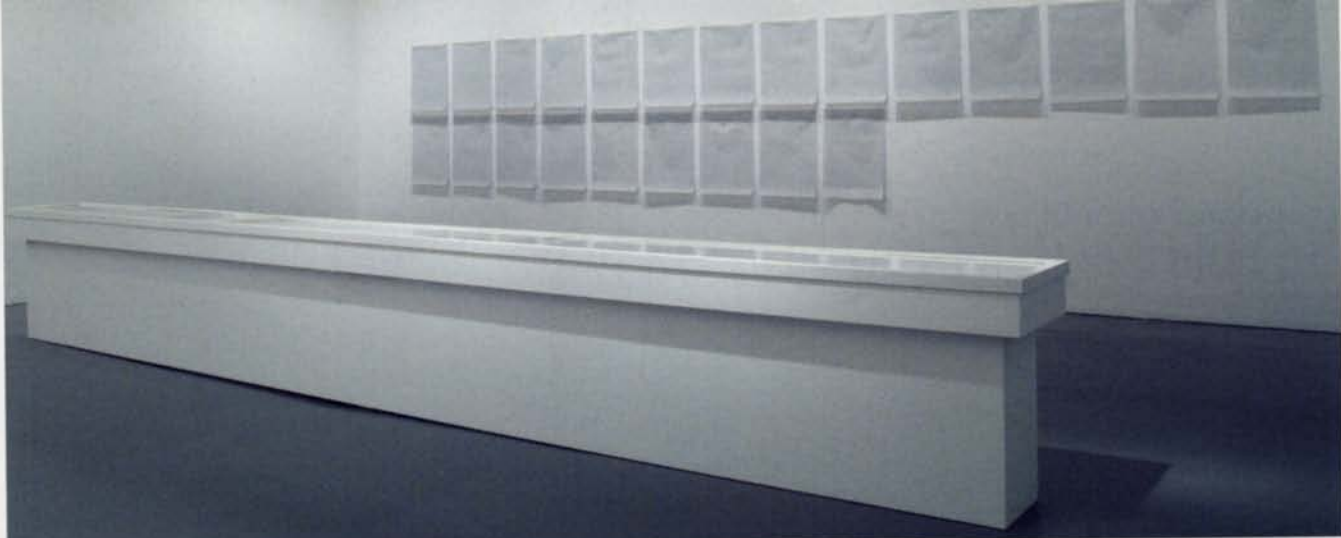


BY FRANCINE KOSLOW MILLER

Rachel Perry Welty creates meticulously arranged, often language-based sculpture. *you may already be a winner*, the titular relief of her recent solo show at New York's Yancey Richardson Gallery, crafts a single sheet of aluminum foil into a continuous line of cursive script. The source material is the subject line of a spam message. The artist characterizes this work as "spam wrapped as leftovers."

Welty first received critical attention for her video *Karaoke Wrong Number* (2004), which is now in the permanent collection of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, where she was a finalist for the Foster Prize in 2006. Her obsessive mapping of her personal life and daily rituals is fascinating, and her ability to organize huge quantities of throwaway materials is impressive. Her fascination with branding and commodification is exemplified by neat configurations of handmade, miniature supermarket items, which claim allegiance to Warhol's use of iconic packaging and to Gabriel Orozco's reliance on the mutability of mundane forms.

Welty lives and works in Boston and New York. Her recent shows include a solo exhibition at Barbara Krakow Gallery and at the Lehman Art Center, in North Andover, Massachusetts, where she was artist-in-residence. She also participated in the group show "Status Update," at Haskins Laboratories in New Haven, Connecticut. She is the recipient of a 2009 Massachusetts Cultural Grant and is currently a fellow at the MacDowell Colony. She is preparing for solo shows at Gallery Diet in Miami (February 2010) and at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Garden in 2011.



Francine Koslow Miller: *You seem to have an uncanny ability to translate what others see as trash into works of great thoughtfulness and beauty. _____ days of life (2002) is an elaborate installation of map tacks that documents the birth and life of your son. Could you describe this early project and explain the relationship of the pins to the increasing number of days in your son's life?*

Rachel Perry Welty: This is an ongoing project documenting my son's lifetime. Each day of the exhibition, I added another pin and corresponding number written directly on the wall in graphite. He was born in 1990. By the opening of the show in February 2002, his life had already reached 4,328 calendar days. The first day was 100 percent of his life, the second day was 50 percent, and so on; so, the pins began to coalesce as the number of days of his life increased. The pin-heads on the white wall read as a microscopic view of germs or cells or as a map of the cosmos. The wall came down after the exhibition, but the work lives on as each day passes. He's now 18.

FKM: *Transcription/Medical Record #32-52-52/001 (645 Pages) (2001-02) also concerns your son. You started with a 645-page medical chart from Boston's Children's Hospital and re-ordered it into continuous grids without spaces between words. This work is an ingenious and heartfelt conceptual approach to illness.*

RPW: I transcribed by hand, symbol for symbol, word for word, starting at page one of the chart and going through to the end. In re-reading, re-organizing, and recording it into a grid format, I tried to organize the pain of the experience. At first, I couldn't understand much of the medical jargon—it has its own language

Top and left: Transcription/Medical Record #32-52-52/001 (645 Pages), 2001-02. Ink on 23 vellum pages, installation view and detail. Above: _____ days of life (detail), 2002-ongoing. 4,300+ map tacks and graphite, 156 x 360 x .125 in.

with codes and symbols, shorthand and idioms. Then there is the chart to consider. Think about it—it contains the most intimate details of one's life.

FKM: *Was the process—which took about 20 hours per drawing—therapeutic?*

RPW: People often ask me that, but rather than being about remembering, I think that it is more about forgetting—about how we focus on the mundane in order to forget the pain. All of my early work was about managing chaos.

FKM: *These works based on your son's early life become part of a dialogue with feminist art. I'm thinking of Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document (1973-79) and Prewriting Alphabet, Exergue and Diary (1977-78), which focused on the development of her son from birth to age five. In this project, she presented a series of slates in which her child's pre-writing letter shapes became part of a feminist Rosetta stone. This work investigated childhood development, but it also formed an exegesis on Kelly's stake in motherhood.*

RPW: And a way of coding, creating, and investigating language and the making of meaning. That's the part that most interests me—the interpretation and the role of language. Possibly this was my exegesis too, my stake in motherhood, as I transcribed with maternal devotion, finding errors and inconsistencies within

the pages—a mind-numbing task that was as repetitive as making meals and cleaning up after children. The almost surgically clean formal quality of the drawings is a direct contrast to the messiness of life and the trauma of having a sick child. And the intimate nature of the drawings (one must come close to see, and reading them is a difficult exercise) reveals that all is not well.

FKM: *One of your most celebrated works is Karaoke Wrong Number (2004). You have said that, like the body of work based on your son's medical chart, this video self-portrait, which shows you lip-syncing to wrong number messages, was driven by your interest in issues of privacy, identity, expectations, and assumptions.*

RPW: This work came about after I received a spate of wrong number calls on my answering machine. I couldn't bear to erase the messages. They were humorous, unnerving, and mundane; each had an urgency that I wanted to address. The disembodied voice that I work with at the beginning is a lady calling to complain about dust in the church. She is nice about it, but she clearly wants the priest to know how difficult it is for her and the choir to practice. It is humorous, but also poignant, how she assumed that the information was going to get to the proper person. It made me realize that we are always just a hair's breadth away from completely misunderstanding one another. And it made me consider how we shed information about ourselves as we move through our lives. That got me thinking about issues of privacy and how technology both helps and impedes communication.

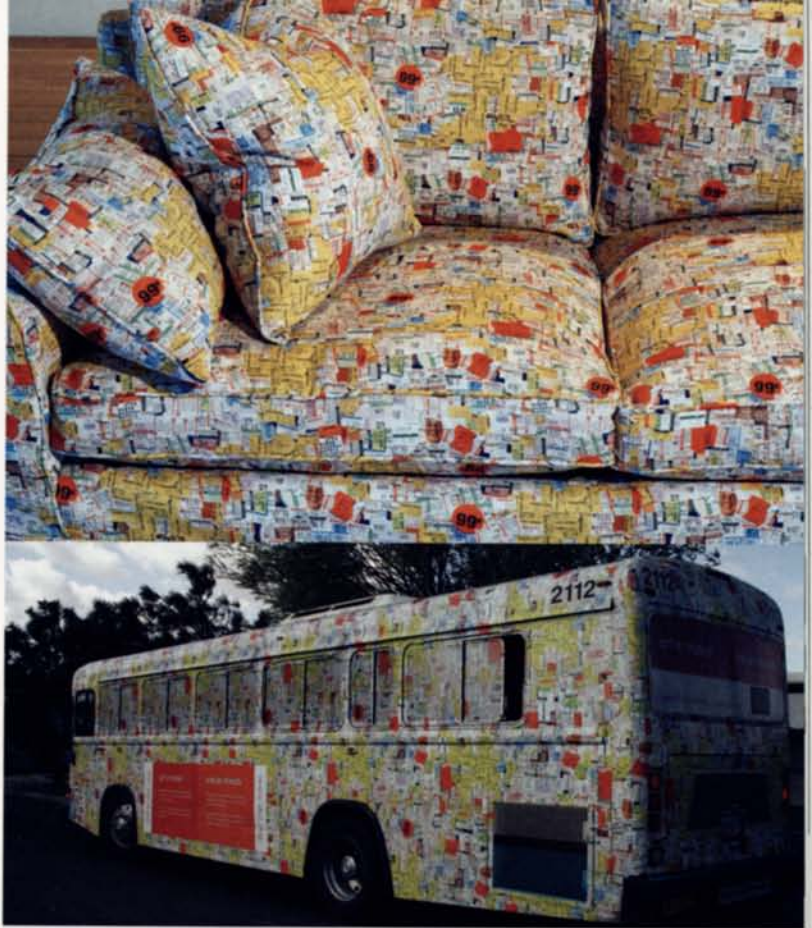
FKM: *But you used technology to make the piece, complete with pauses and jumps. There are about a dozen different messages.*

RPW: I saved and then played the messages over and over from my speakerphone in order to transcribe the "ums" and "ahs" and pauses, and then I rehearsed with the video camera running. The whole thing was made in a very low-tech way, from recording the messages through the speakerphone onto digital audio tape and then using iMovie to assemble and synchronize the audio and video. The word "karaoke" means "empty orchestra." I like that poetic oxymoron: empty yet full.

FKM: *You have a considerable collection of food tags. For "Daily Bread," your 2004 show at Barbara Krakow Gallery, you created 208,896 Loaves (2004), a brightly colored monument to 15 years' worth of bread tags. Your fascination with these small, date-stamped, plastic freshness preservers is both aesthetic and conceptual. Daily Bread (2004), a ready-made calendar of bread tags, offers another version of this preoccupation.*

RPW: *Daily Bread*, which I have included in my last two shows, features seven years of collected bread tags from my kitchen drawer. Arranged in a grid by "sell-by" dates, they make a pastel calendar representing any day, any year. I made rules for myself: if I'm missing a date, I leave a square inch of white space. In the summer, we eat far less bread or we travel more, so you see more gaps. Some are piled atop one another to record when two or three loaves were bought on the same day.

FKM: *Sofa (2008), which formed part of your homey, site-specific installation at the Lehman Art Center, is a multi-colored slipcover made from a continuous pattern of supermarket price stickers and the smiling face of the Quaker Oats man. Some stickers come*



Top: *Sofa*, 2008. Die sublimation print on fabric, dimensions variable.

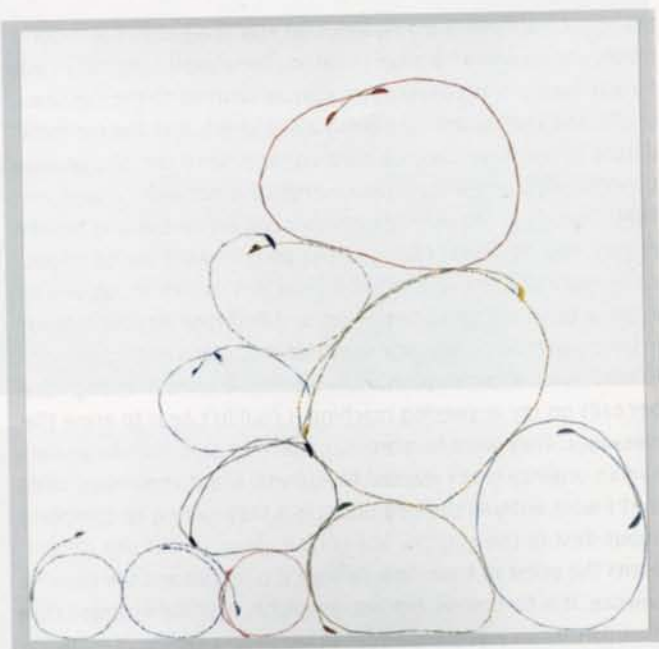
Above: *Bu\$*, 2007. Vinyl wrap, installed on Santa Fe Transit System bus.

from food products, others from health and beauty departments. This user-friendly work is packed with commodity information: PLU stickers, sell-by dates, sale tags. You seem to be trying to make the viewer comfortable with your accountings of domesticity. How has this project evolved?

RPW: I started with a collage of stickers on a Quaker Oats cereal box. I'd come home from shopping and peel the stickers off boxes, bags, and cans and stick them onto the empty box. Then I scanned that collage into Photoshop and taught myself how to make a repeat pattern. The second iteration was *Bu\$* (2007). Working with the Santa Fe Art Institute and the Santa Fe Trails bus company, I had the pattern made into a vinyl wrap that covered the outside of a bus. For the sofa piece, I had the slipcover professionally made, complete with eight pillows and a skirt.

FKM: *You also use your ever-growing collection of fruit stickers to make elegant works on paper. You call them "Fruit Sticker Drawings," though they are collages created by carefully cutting and taping produce stickers onto paper.*

RPW: I see them as drawings because their piece-by-piece creation becomes an accretion of marks. Each orb in these drawings, which get their titles from the brand-names on the labels, is created by an extension of a used produce sticker, a visual remnant with its own language rich in other information (economic, political, geographical, and social). *Guatemala, Guatemala* (2008) tells us where our fruit comes from, and it consists of discrete ovoids made from cut-up apple, banana, and papaya stickers, among others. The



Top left and detail: *Product*, 2007–ongoing. Laser prints and adhesive, 108 x 216 x 2 in. Installation at Johnson & Johnson Global Design Headquarters, NY. Above: *Salsa*, 2009. Fruit stickers and archival tape on paper, 21.5 x 21.5 in.

stickers become traces of the objects bought and consumed, just as language itself is a trace, and, for that matter, a drawing.

FKM: *I also read them as bas-reliefs and as a sculptor's preparatory drawings. They appear to me as stand-ins for the actual produce, with circular or ovoid forms that refer back to the originals.*

RPW: It is interesting that you said that, because they are bas-relief, or "flat sculpture," and they do evoke the three-dimensional forms of the fruit and vegetables. I like that movement between dimensions. But, at the same time, they are not representational. I hope that they merely suggest.

FKM: *These drawings, which are so light and colorful, seem to make up a DNA of domesticity and record the cycle of consumption. How do you get all the stickers, and how do you save them?*

RPW: They are surprisingly colorful, and the variety out there is amazing. Most people look at the apple or the pear, not the label. But when I shop, I'm looking at the labels. I even peel some off in the store. When a friend accused me of stealing, I insisted that I'm doing a public service. I harvest the stickers, place them on wax paper, and when I'm ready, I affix them to double-sided tape. They are my raw material.

FKM: *Since your first commercial gallery exhibition, you have been creating and exhibiting miniature consumer goods. In *Product* (2007–ongoing), a site-specific installation at Johnson & Johnson Global Design Headquarters in New York, you have re-created more*

than 600 Johnson & Johnson boxes (so far) in perfect facsimile. The center cluster includes nearly 100 early packages designed to sell products such as smelling salts and bandage plasters. As the sculpture spreads, the newest products claim their spaces. They are all created from color laser prints and adhesives.

RPW: Each year, as new Johnson & Johnson products are developed, I add their likenesses to the wall. This is a conceptual gesture that mimics the never-ending nature of consumption itself.

FKM: *Little Luxuries (2009), 25 miniature paper bags and boxes from names like Fendi, Tiffany, Hermès, and Chanel, is your latest derivation of consumer goods. These miniatures represent a fabricated world of proportion, control, and balance. How did this series, made of color inkjet prints, ink, thread, and adhesive, develop?*

RPW: I was thinking about the miniature as a vehicle for desire. The miniature is defined in relation to us. Who can resist the exoticism of something tiny? That unexpected shift in scale inflames the desire to acquire and ignites our complicated relationship to beauty and desire. When the economy started tanking, I read that people no longer wanted to carry these status items. It suddenly became unfashionable. The shrinking of the bags and boxes became a comment on the diminishment of luxury brand power. And, of course, these packages are empty.

FKM: *Blue, Orange, Yellow, Black & Pink (from Little Luxuries, 2009), a blue Tiffany bag, an orange Hermès bag, a yellow Fendi bag, a black Chanel bag, and a pink Pink bag—are formally reminiscent of an early Ellsworth Kelly installation, gone feminist. Is this work a kind of feminist Minimalism and a commentary on consumerism or collecting? And how did you make the decision about scale?*

RPW: I don't mind the association with Kelly. Absolutely, it's a com-

LEFT: COURTESY THE ARTIST, YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY, NY, BARBARA KRASKOW GALLERY, BOSTON / RIGHT: CLEMENTS/SHOWGROFT, COURTESY YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY, NY, BARBARA KRASKOW GALLERY, BOSTON

ment on consumerism. The title comments on color-as-brand. Tiffany is associated with that particular color blue, and Thomas Pink is the name brand as well as the color. Many people save the bags because they are obviously expensive and hefty, and it feels wrong to recycle or throw them away. They are a part of that shopping experience: the luxury is the waste. Regarding collecting, in a lovely recursive gesture, my collection of bags is largely acquired from several of my collectors, who collected them for themselves but were willing to give them up for my work. Concerning scale, I wanted to make them as small as I possibly could while still being able to read the logos and manipulate them with my fingers without tweezers and magnifying glasses.

FKM: *China Cabinet (2009) continues your series of ballpoint ink drawings on Styrofoam. Here, the take-out containers are joined with Styrofoam cups. Could you tell me about this installation, which is arranged on a piece made to imitate your mother's china cabinet?*

RPW: The take-out containers are joined by white meat trays and Styrofoam cups, all collected from my extended family. I re-created the shelf from my mother's 1930s kitchen. I traced the sides of the shelf with a Sharpie marker on tracing paper and had the shelf fabricated in clear Plexiglas. Again, I am drawing inspiration from my life. As much as I travel (I've lived in Japan, Portugal, and France), my work always comes back to home. It's what I know best.

FKM: *What are the designs based on—are they just fun designs?*

RPW: They are based on a type of drawing that I continue to make with a simple rule: "Make one orb. Make a contiguous orb. Every orb after that has to touch two orbs." So they are dependent on each other. The circle represents the continuous meals, the cycle of consumption: we shop, we cook, we sleep, and we get up and do it all over again. The shapes approximate the shape of the pellets that make up Styrofoam.

FKM: *Are there any political/ecological implications in how you arrange these cheap, disposable materials as "luxury" items?*

RPW: It says something about what we value, doesn't it? I'm not preaching. We're all implicated. Someday, let's hope that Styrofoam is so rare as to be considered a luxury item. I am elevating these pieces to the status of precious. They are "displayed" like fine Blue Willow china. But here, it's a china pattern run amok. Or is it a slowly spreading virus?

FKM: *I am curious about the cursive font in the "Spam" series—shiny, aluminum foil wall reliefs like you may already be a winner (Henrietta, June 11, 2007 9:24:24 EDT) (2008). The subject lines from spam messages become something delicate and beautiful.*

RPW: I collected the many subject lines that arrived in my mailbox from unknown senders, and these random words somehow made transcendent sense when I took them out of their original context. I wanted to immortalize them in aluminum foil. Each one is made from a single sheet. To change the font size (I created my own font), I just cut the aluminum foil lengthwise in quarters for a small font and halves for a medium font. A full sheet makes the large font. It's very hard work and not always fun. In a sense, making them is a performance. It takes a lot of focus because you can't go back after you've crushed tin foil. Unlike a lot of my work,



Thinking of You, too, 2008. Mirrored Plexiglas, 3 elements, 27 x 37 x .5 in.

it's not reversible. I have one chance. It's important to me that they are made from one piece. If I make a mistake, I have to start again from the beginning.

FKM: *I love the idea that you have included a Spam Menu along with the finished wall reliefs.*

RPW: I felt that the natural way to follow through on this project was to create a list, or a menu, from which people can choose their preferred message. Then I make them fresh, to order. The word "menu" has already been co-opted by the computer industry, so with "Spam," it just seemed natural. (I recently found out that all those newsletters and things I sign up for but don't always want to read when they appear in my mailbox are called "bacn.")

FKM: *Could you talk about the word-play in other "Spam" pieces?*

RPW: I've used "take a look at your future" and "everything should be okay" in a traveling show about global warming. One collector bought *lucky day* and used it on the invitation for her Presidential Inauguration Party in January. The phrases are surprisingly open-ended and mean different things to different people. I've always loved words. For my 14th birthday, my father gave me a book called *Le Mot Juste*. I was an English major and used to sweat over every word and turn of phrase in writing a paper. Whether it's poring over the intricacies of a medical chart or composing an e-mail, I think a lot about the words we use. I remember my mother telling me that her former employer, Edwin H. Land of Polaroid, used to say, "The world belongs to the articulate."

Francine Koslow Miller has written for Artforum since the 1980s and is currently writing The Rape of the Rose Art Museum.