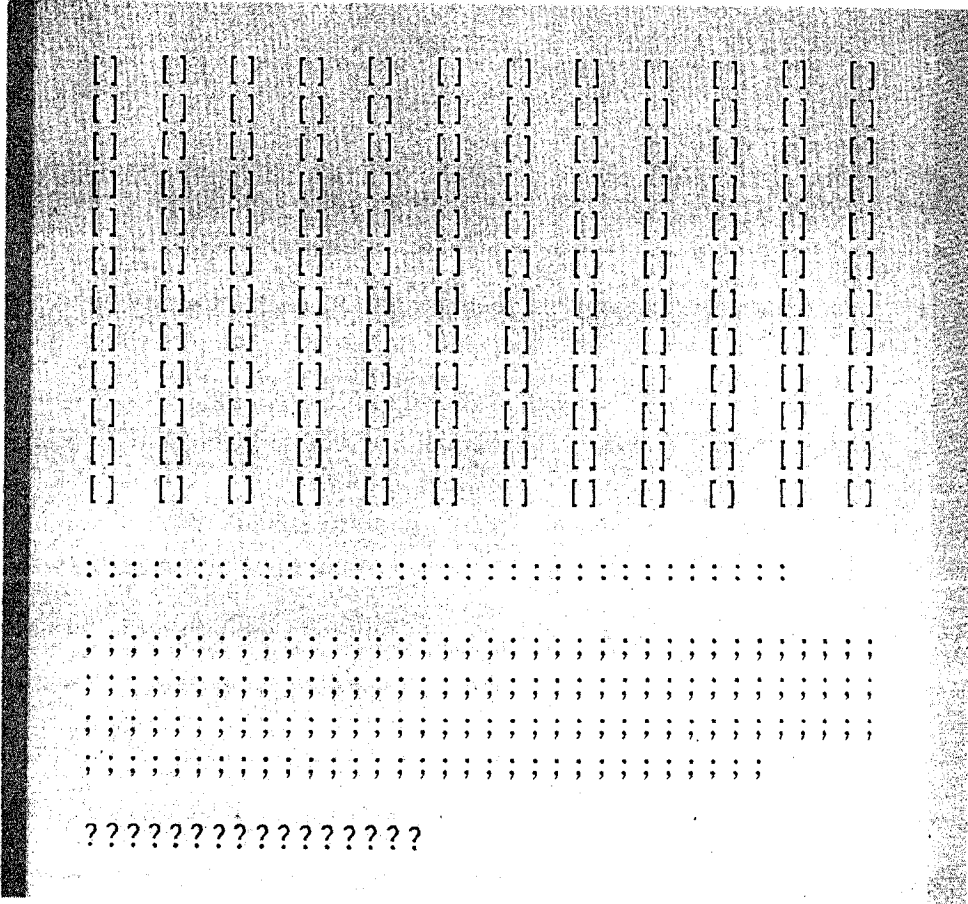


Los Angeles Exhibitions



To Agree with Freud or Not to Agree

Stephen Berens at ACME

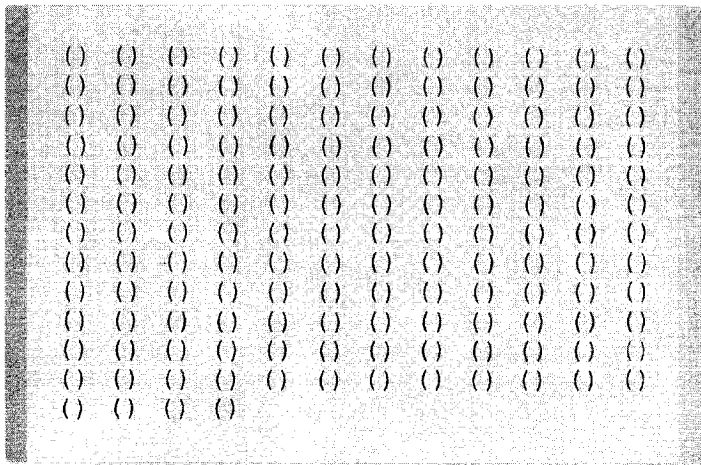
by Christopher Miles

Stephen Berens, Punctuation: Where We Disagree, 1996. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

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Let's get to the specifics. All works constituting this project are derived from a comparison of Sigmund Freud's 1923 text *The Ego and the Id* to Stephen Berens' 1977 Master of Fine Arts thesis. Of the roughly 150 drawings, one group, called *Where Freud and I Agree*, includes an accounting of words Freud and Berens share, each drawn in a bookish typeface as many times as it appears in either text. A second group, AKA *Where Freud and I Disagree: My MFA Thesis*, documents the exact position on each page of Berens' thesis where words unique to Berens appear. The third group of drawings, falling under the heading of *Analysis*, offers lists of words chosen from the texts by various criteria: words Freud used that Berens wishes he'd used, words Berens is glad he didn't use, etc. All the drawings are reproduced in a limited-edition cloth-covered boxed set of hardbound books. Rounding out the project, in 62 paint-on-paper works Berens took pages of Freud's text and painted out all words employed by both authors, leaving only those unique to Freud. And to give the project a feel of exhaustiveness, and to give it what every conceptual project needs—something big to hang on the wall—Berens provides 14 paintings on canvas, which pose side-by-side breakdowns of the punctuation used in each text.

So now maybe you're won-



Stephen Berens, Punctuation: Where We Agree, Parenthesis, 1996. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

dering why, or maybe you're laughing, or perhaps you're wondering why you're laughing or laughing at the fact that you're wondering why, and perhaps you've hit on something. This is either a daft (and obsessive) slice of cultural satire, or it is the most frightening specimen of conceptual cancer I've ever seen. I'll buy into the former; it's too hard for me to believe that Berens would be able to resist shooting me a wink, were he standing in the room. This might seem an awful lot of work to go to in the service of play, and it also might seem little more than a clever path to a super cool but inevitably dead end. I would choose, however, to think of these works as rather liberating in their capacity to reveal and have fun with art, even rigorous art: a hook on which we hang the hats of our choosing.

It didn't need to be comparisons of Freud's classic and Berens' art school thesis, though the pairing has added bite for any

recovering graduate student. It could have been the Sunday paper and *Gone With the Wind*, and I'd still manage to find poetry in there somewhere, philosophy somewhere else, and comedy stuck in between. (I'm still not sure why I found it interesting or entertaining that Freud used such an abundance of brackets, colons, semicolons and question marks while Berens outquoted him by nine to one, but I did.) Duchamp understood this sort of thing when he displayed his readymades, and Warhol served it straight up when he made paintings of Rorschach blots.

I'm not always such a fan of the cool; it tends to leave me cold. Handled with the right sense of humor, however, a touch of coolness can be much more human and honest than a whole truckload of warmth. Berens has managed to grab my heart with the magic touch of a clinician. Sometimes the most inspiring force can be a whiff of nihilism.