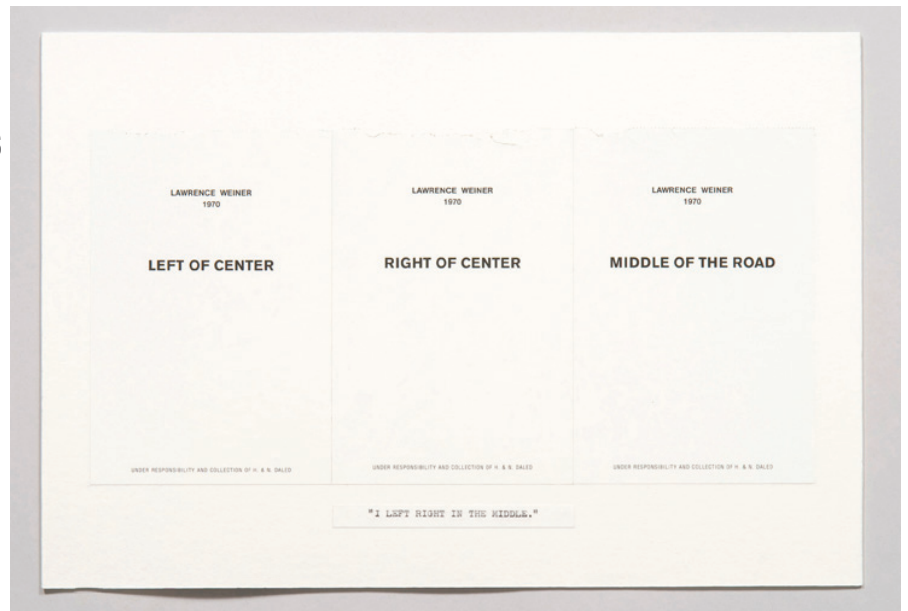


# ARTslant

## HALFEMPTY by Erik Wenzel

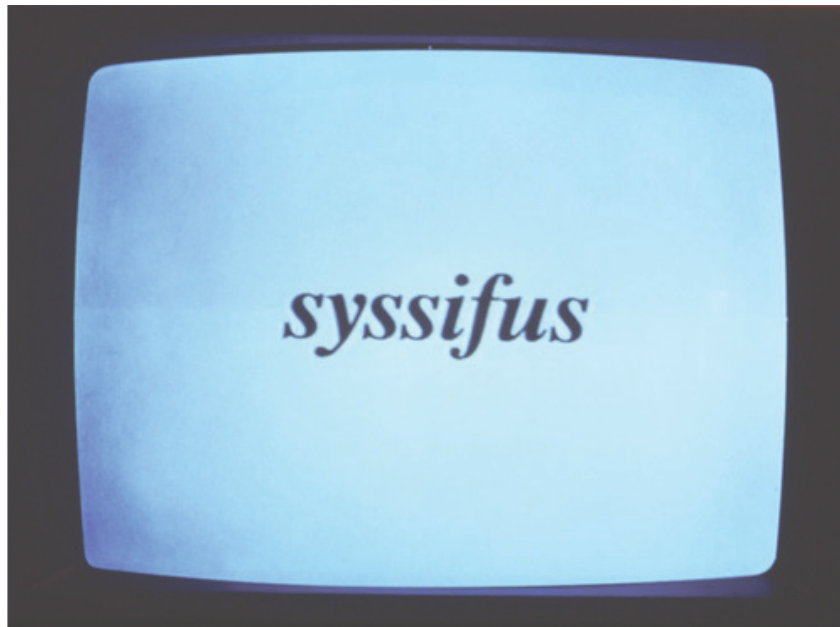
### Kay Rosen

Gallery 400  
UIC College of Architecture and the Arts  
400 S. Peoria Street  
Chicago, IL 60607  
August 25–November 21, 2009



I have grown to love Rosen's unique deadpan combination of careful text manipulation and minimal aesthetics over the years, but this group of work tends towards disappointment. This exhibition at Gallery 400 collects a video, a display case of works on paper with more works on paper on the walls. It has changed over the course of its run since opening alongside Michael Ruglio-Misurell's *Project #12* in August.

An interesting moment occurred in the exhibition as Ruglio-Misurell's accumulation of stuff abutted and contrasted with Kay Rosen's spartan space. On one side of a wall was a world of confusion, on the other, the austere collection of drawings and works on paper by Rosen. After Ruglio-Misurell's exhibition closed, a wall painting *HALFULL*, 2004, was installed on the freed up space. A few other elements changed too: a display case moved to the center of the exhibition space, and an altered poster for an Ugo Rondinone show at Matthew Marks was replaced by *Hemorrhage*, 2003, a mixed media collage of a red flower on an image of a red sunset, in addition to the video.



Kay Rosen. *Sisyphus*, 1991. Single channel video. Image courtesy of the artist.

The video *Sisyphus*, 1991, presents numerous phonetic spellings of the eponymous tragic Greek character in black text on a white background. Unsurprisingly, each version gets it wrong. The video almost seems to say “Try again!” as the drum roll crescendos into a stock comedy rim-shot at each failed attempt on the soundtrack.

*Sisyphus* has a knowing glare to it, an elbow in your rib, but other works just feel too enamored with their own wit. In a way, *Sisyphus* illustrates the viewing process in an institutional setting. “Did you get it?” say the didactic gallery-goers, while the tour guides want to point you to the interpretive answer without necessarily giving it all away.

The piece *Hijacked*, 2002, consists of a series of Sue Grafton covers. Grafton is the murder mystery author who goes through the alphabet with titles like *A is for Alibi*, *B is for Burglar*, *C is for Corpse* and so on. Grafton’s project is highly cheesy to begin with, but also strangely conceptual and self-punishing. In Rosen’s piece, fragments of the alphabet appear in a grid. From that several letters are missing (presumably since Grafton was only so far in 2002), so the arrangement looks less like a partial grid than a crossword puzzle. The title is “hijacked,” and sure enough, those letters are missing.

This sort of game is played out again and again with the viewer. It feels like a word jumble, a brainteaser or a code that reveals a clever pun. Perhaps it is more than that, but it is nearly impossible to get past it. In a generous sense, this could be seen as the stages of art is consumption laid bare: You encounter a work of art, are stumped, figure it out, and then say, “Oohhh I get it.”

This linguistic turn of Rosen’s works better when the connection between words is much more absurd and forced. *Ho, Ho, Ho*, 2001, is just a white square of paper printed with a holly pattern. Affixed to it is a slip of worn red paper with the following stamped on it: “Idaho, Frijoles, Maholy-Nagy.” Well, there are the three ho’s. It is the strange combination of subjects that gives it that extra punch and how the pronunciation

shifts from English, to Spanish to art speak. There's also something beautiful in the random meeting of a state, a Mexican food and a modernist on a Christmas card.



Kay Rosen. *John Wilkes Booth*, 1987. Image courtesy of the artist.

I think that the great pieces that initially drew me into Rosen's work had a crucial combination of linguistic tricks, humor, cultural reference and a certain dumbness. The formula is very specific, when each element is right and manifested as a satisfying visual object you get a piece like *John Wilkes Booth* (seen above): "assass / in in / the the / ater."

Nothing like that is particularly present here. *HALFULL*, is pretty easy to get, the "F" is shared by "half" and "full." What is really interesting and curious is how Rosen personifies the letters in an accompanying text from 2004 that otherwise over-explains the piece. "F" must choose which word lives and which one dies. If "F" picks "half" then "ull" ceases to be a word. If "F" picks "full," "hal" ceases to be a word. Except "Hal" is a word, it's a name. This peculiar tangent narrating the situation of linguistic experimentation in terms of emotive drama adds a layer, but that doesn't necessarily enhance the work. Maybe I'm a clod, but I'm left cold.

—Erik Wenzel