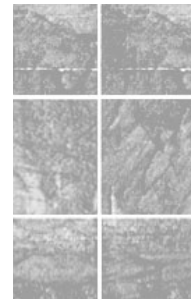


visual communication

VISUAL ESSAY

Visual literacy in the public space

MATT SIBER



INTRODUCTION

The Untitled Project¹ is a result of my search for a way to explore issues of power and control between large groups of people by focusing on the hegemony of mass communication in the public space. The initial concept was naively simplistic and faulty but its execution opened a continually expanding range of ideas. My initial motivation for removing text from public spaces was to free the modern citizen from the onslaught of language that is ubiquitous in our environment. I felt this to be a noble cause until I finished editing my first piece in Photoshop and immediately became aware of the errors in my initial concept. Despite the lack of text, I was still able to interpret most messages through visual rather than literate forms of communication, resulting in little to no loss of power of this voice I was attempting to silence. The result of this revelation was the reintroduction of the text as a two-dimensional map of approximate location, font, orientation and size relationships, turning the project into a study through deconstruction rather than an attempted liberation.

My increasing awareness of the level of visual communication in contemporary culture brings me to posit my overriding thesis for this project in that the sophistication of the visual vocabulary of the general populace is reaching levels where, in most cases, text is either unnecessary or secondary to the comprehension of the voices present in our public space. In order to better understand the nature of this vocabulary, I have categorized the sources of these voices into five major categories: corporate/commercial, municipal, propaganda, news/mass media and subversive. Although many of the voices present in my photographs can be associated with more than one of these categories, I use them as a general framework for examining the manifestations of visual communication through color, graphic design, photography and architecture.

THE CORPORATE/COMMERCIAL VOICE

The most prevalent presence in the urban landscape, and the primary focus

of The Untitled Project, is the corporate or commercial voice. This is the voice of advertising and promotion through all forms of public communication. Sometimes this voice acts as a not-so-gentle reminder like a Nike swoosh on someone's shirt or a corporate logo on a truck or van like the People's Energy truck and equipment in *Untitled #16*. More often, the message is screamed at visual high volume from billboards and the sides of buildings like the advertisements in *Untitleds #8, #13 and #17*. Universally, this voice serves the sole purpose of increasing corporate revenue through the power of persuasion and by establishing a brand identity.

Kodak may have been the first corporation to officially adopt a color as part of their corporate identity when they trademarked 'Kodak yellow' in the late 19th century. Since then, trademarks based on colors have been heavily restricted but the use of color has become inextricably integrated into the language of corporate identity. While some colors are meant to make you think of the corporation itself, like the yellow and red of the McDonald's in *Untitled #22* or the three colored dots in the CB2 advertisement in *Untitled #8*, color is also used by advertisers to convey an idea or feeling about their brand. The luscious gold color of the Christian Dior advertisement in *Untitled #13*, for example, brings to mind ideas of luxury, wealth and decadence. Through repeated exposure to these signifiers, the individual becomes trained to recognize brand identity from a single color or a particular combination thereof.

Graphic design is what unites the elements of color, text and photography to create a holistic consistency and overall feel for visual advertising. One of the most recognizable elements of graphic design is the corporate logo, which acts as a visual stand-in for the company name. Although logos are meant to be visual symbols that register very quickly with the viewer, they are often based on text. For instance, I didn't remove the McDonald's 'M' in *Untitled #22* because I felt that the highly stylized letter no longer read as text. In other words, when people see it, they don't think of the sound of 'm' but of the restaurant 'McDonald's'. Whether one considers the McDonald's 'M' text or not, it would be hard to argue against its value as one of the most powerful symbols in the world, even in nations where the letter 'm' has no literate meaning.

An even more extreme example of the strength of graphic design is illustrated in *Untitled #9*. This El train in Chicago has been engulfed by the corporate voice but, in this case, the voice is entirely visual. The text element to this piece only shows three small bits of text, each one a product of the municipal voice warning patrons to stand back from the doors and identifying the train car by number. The graphic designer is able to bring the red color, the photography and the strategically placed Target logos together to make this form of communication so effective that the word 'Target' becomes unnecessary.

The technology of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has allowed for the proliferation of photographs well beyond the printed page and into

our environment, sometimes at an awe-inspiring scale. We have become so accustomed to seeing photographs, it is not uncommon to encounter advertising that communicates purely through the power of photography with little, or even no text at all. The Banana Republic billboard in *Untitled #23* is a good example of how a single, uncaptioned photograph can convey the corporate message. In this case, the purpose of the text at the bottom of the sign is to assure the photograph's association with the words 'Banana Republic'. Their technique has been so successful that these words bring to mind the trendy clothing store well before we think of their original political meaning. This particular Banana Republic campaign is based on a series of photographs designed to project an attitude and lifestyle for the clothes they make. Not only has the consumer become visually literate enough to pick up on the subtle signifiers in these images, but advertisers are also able to achieve a high level of brand recognition through the style of their photography. This means that the public is able to recognize consistencies in composition, color palette, lighting and mood in a series of photographs despite the fact that they never see all the pictures in one place at the same time. Before long, the Banana Republic tag at the bottom of the frame becomes as superfluous as the word 'McDonald's' below the famous golden M.

THE MUNICIPAL VOICE

The municipal voice, without which we are lost in our constructed environment, exists to help us move through our space safely and efficiently. Street and highway signs, like the ones in *Untitled #14*, help direct and orient the individual. Signs conveying traffic laws, such as 'stop', 'no turn on red', 'yield' and 'do not enter', create order and safety by setting the rules and standards by which we move through public space. License plates and Department of Transportation identification numbers on the sides of trucks also fall into this category but serve the more internal function of aiding in government control.

The public municipal voice is the most strictly structured when it comes to visual communication but can sometimes fall far short of its function if the text is removed. In the US, street and traffic signs are clearly designated by shape and color in order to create a redundancy as a failsafe. The large rectangular shape and green color of the signs in *Untitled #14* tell us that the sign is there to help direct or orient us. Also recognizable by shape and color are the two US Interstate badges in blue and red. Despite the visual information contained in these signs, the individual is still unable to either orient himself or herself in, or navigate through, the space without the specifics of the missing text. In contrast to this, a stop sign is one of the most important traffic signs for preventing accidents. Not only is it the only sign that is octagonal in shape but it is also the only sign that is entirely red. These two visual clues make the word 'stop' virtually unnecessary. Through this example I discovered that text in the landscape isn't always redundant or always crucial.

PROPAGANDA

The voice of propaganda includes political messages from the existing government, people running for public office, social and political watchdog groups and politically motivated graffiti. In order to communicate with a broad audience, the propagandized voice is largely visual and highly iconographic. Much like newspaper and magazine covers, propagandists use short words or phrases in large fonts, paired with a photograph or graphic symbol. In the US, the American flag is one such icon that is widely used by this voice, whether it is paired with a politician's picture on a campaign poster or promoting nationalistic patriotism by appealing to our sense of duty and pride, similar to the blue signs in *Untitled #12*. The power of these signs is not only derived from the simple three-word slogan 'United We Stand', but can also be attributed to the eye-catching deep-blue color and two very strong symbols of Americanism: the flag and the Statue of Liberty. Add to this the backlit transparency that literally makes them glow, and it is nearly impossible to ignore them. In this case, the iconography is so strong and the catch phrase is so familiar that neither the visual nor the text elements by themselves are sufficient to communicate very powerfully to a post-9/11 America.

NEWS AND MASS MEDIA

The voice of the news and other mass media in western culture is not usually considered particularly strong in the public space. With its main strengths lying in television, radio and print, this voice has managed to carve out its own niche in the modern landscape through news stands, public news tickers and, more recently, outdoor television screens. Communication by the news media has become increasingly photographic since the first half of the 20th century when the top fold of major newspapers was dominated by a big, bold headline that commanded attention through the size and flair of the printed words or phrase. Although top-fold headlines remain major attention getters for newspapers, they have had increasing competition from full-color photographs that are now commonplace in all major US newspapers including (albeit reluctantly) the staunchly traditional *New York Times*. While most of these photographs still serve their journalistic purpose, the images that appear in plain view of passers-by are carefully chosen for their power to draw the attention of the viewers. Other major media organs, such as magazines and journals, are at a greater advantage because they can use expensive glossy paper, bright colors, very brief but large text and a powerful, single photograph to grab the consumer's attention. The images on the covers of these publications are usually a marriage of the specific interests of the magazine and overt graphic appeal (bright colors, eye-catching photography, etc.), and have been instrumental in teaching the public to read photographs.

THE SUBVERSIVE VOICE

The subversive voice, by definition the most underrepresented, usually appears in the form of graffiti and can often cross over into the propaganda category if it is political in nature. Contemporary western graffiti can often be attributed to a backlash against the phenomenon of our public spaces being co-opted by advertisers. By labeling public space as theirs, graffiti artists circumvent the problem of being unable to afford the high cost of public advertising, thereby subverting the existing capitalistic paradigm that blocks the individual citizen access to this space.

Although most graffiti is text-based, the art form tends to walk the line between literate and visual communication. One of the most basic forms of subversive public text is the urban phenomenon of tagging, where a graffiti artist adopts an assumed moniker to assure anonymity with the authorities while gaining recognition in the local community. Because of the expressive nature of this form of text, tags have become so visually elaborate that they are rarely read as words but, instead, rely on form and design for recognition. At this level, they act more like corporate logos than names or signatures due to the fact that they are either very difficult to read or are completely unreadable as text.

CONCLUSION

The Untitled Project is still a work in progress and is expected to be for several more years. Throughout the project, I have become increasingly fascinated by the sophisticated visual vocabulary of modern society. For an historically analogous time period we might look to the European Renaissance when sculptures, paintings and frescos adorned public spaces for the purpose of communicating to a largely non-literate population. During that era, most people were familiar with the religious symbolism in these works of art whereas now nearly everyone in 21st-century culture has learned to read the visual language of mass communication. With a worldwide population of consumers for a target audience and the technology for instant message transmission and dissemination, I believe that mass visual communication has never been as complex or as powerful as it is in the current era.

NOTE

1. Images from The Untitled Project appeared in the *Conversations: Text and Image* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago from 26 February to 17 April 2004. More work from this project, including the handmade Untitled Project artist's book, and other work by Matt Siber can be seen on his website at www.siberart.com or in person at Peter Miller Gallery in Chicago [www.petermillergallery.com].



©Matt Siber, *Untitled #12*, 2002



©Matt Siber, *Untitled #3*, 2002

OP-5541

THE
SMARTER WAY
TO OFFICE

andise Mart 320N-200W

No
Smoking
Violators subject to fine

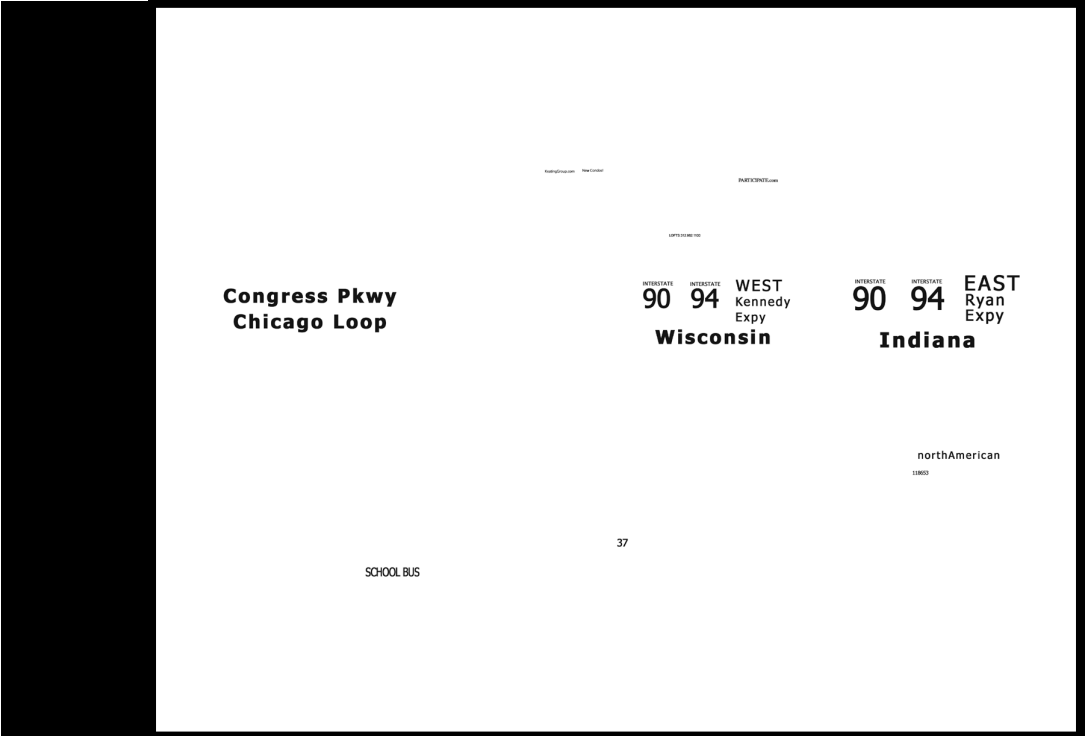
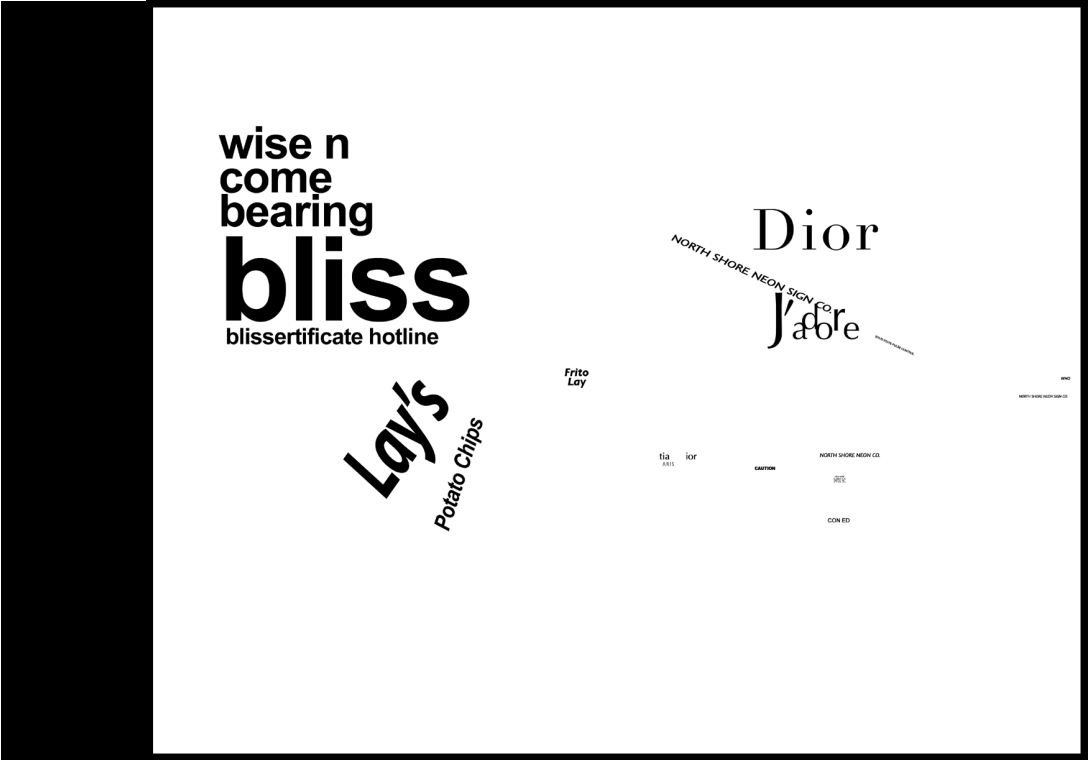
195-00000-00-00000

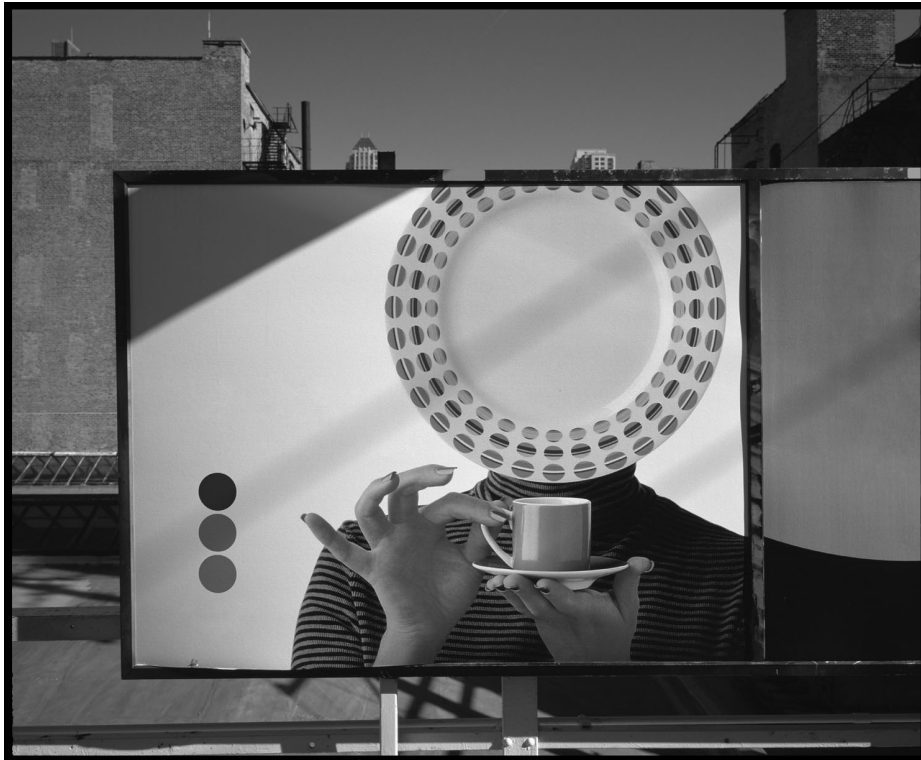


©Matt Siber, *Untitled #13*, 2003



©Matt Siber, *Untitled #14*, 2003

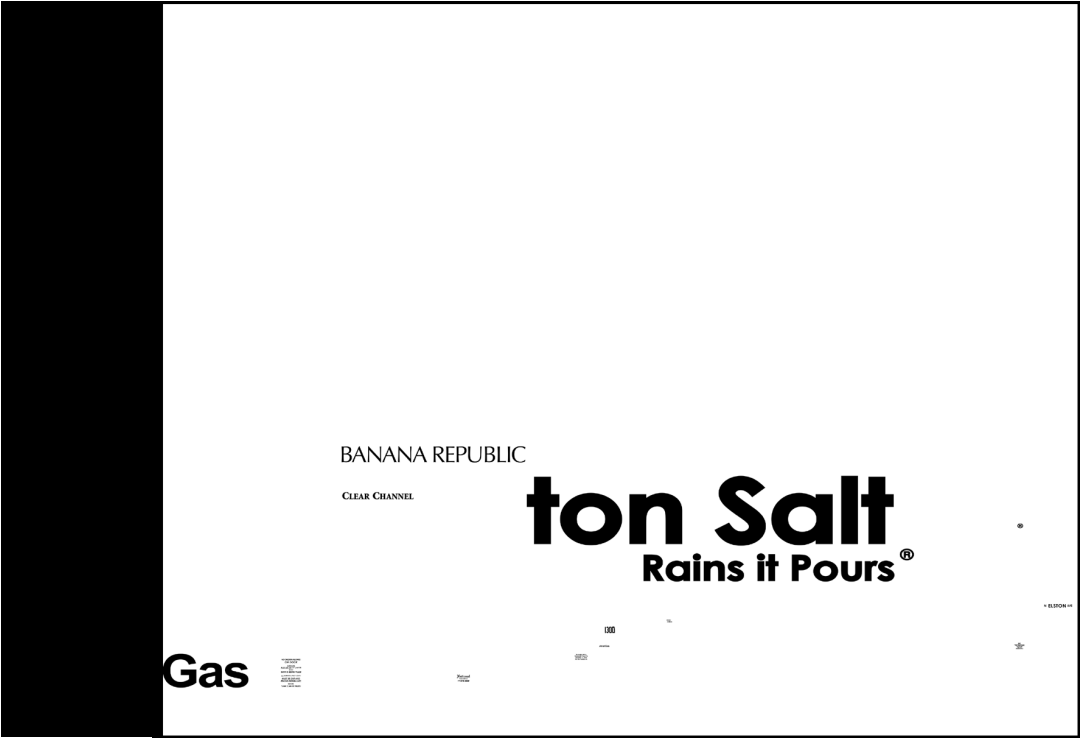
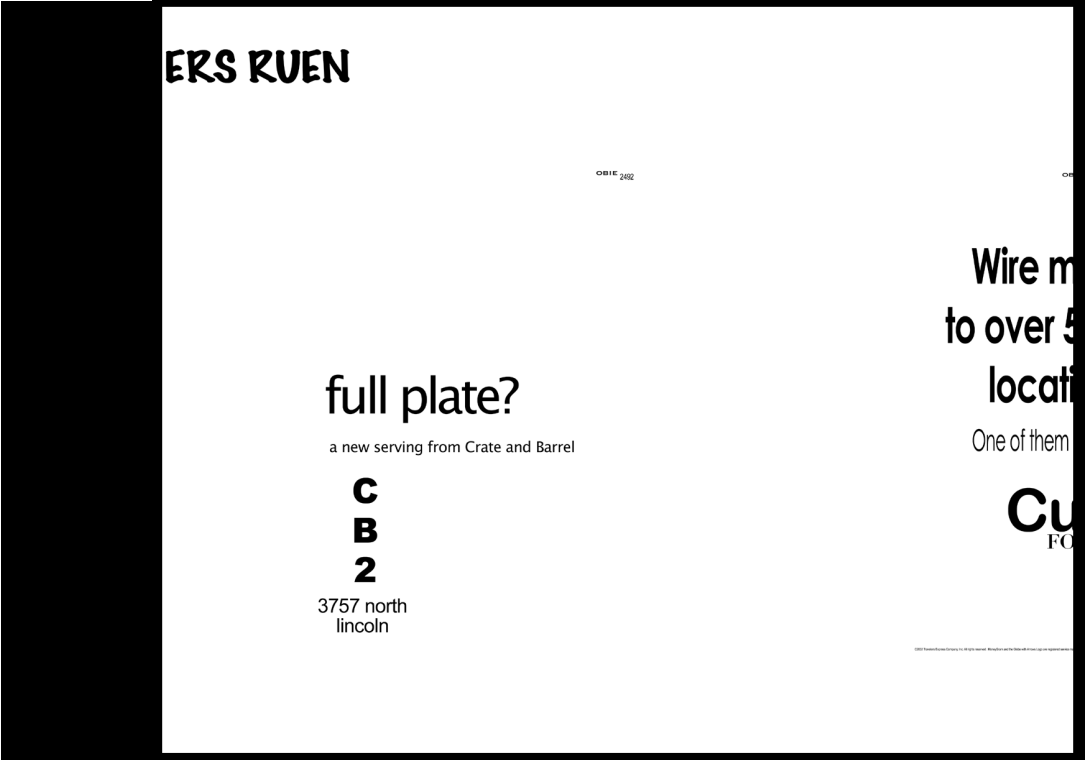




©Matt Siber, *Untitled #8*, 2002



©Matt Siber, *Untitled #23*, 2003

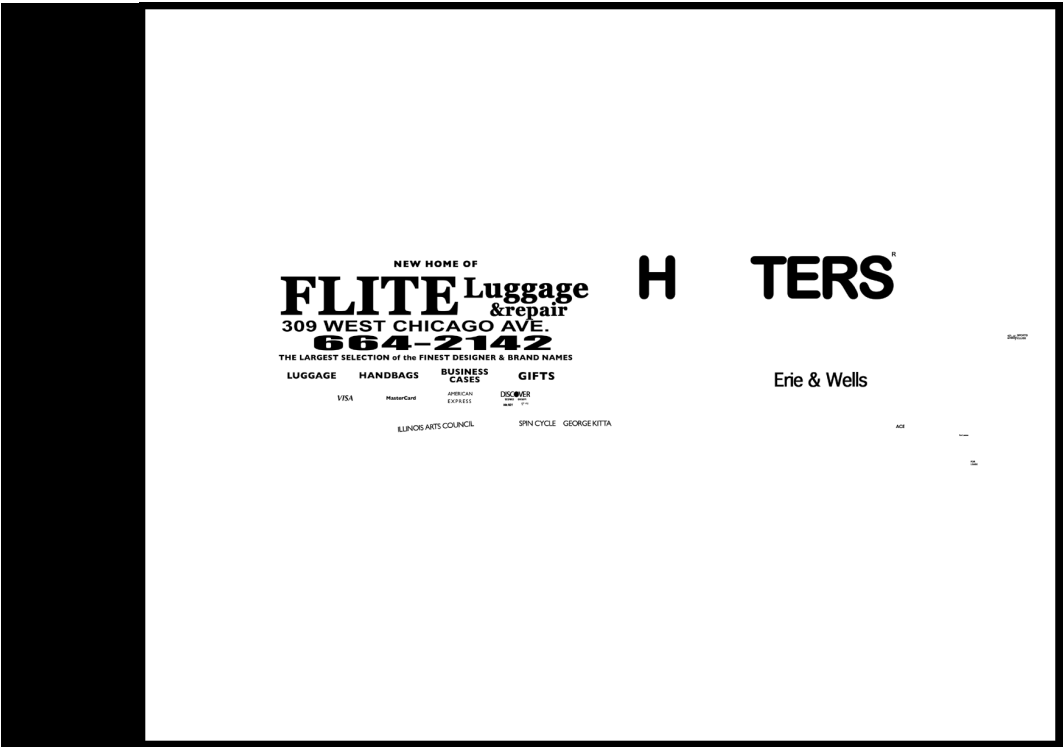
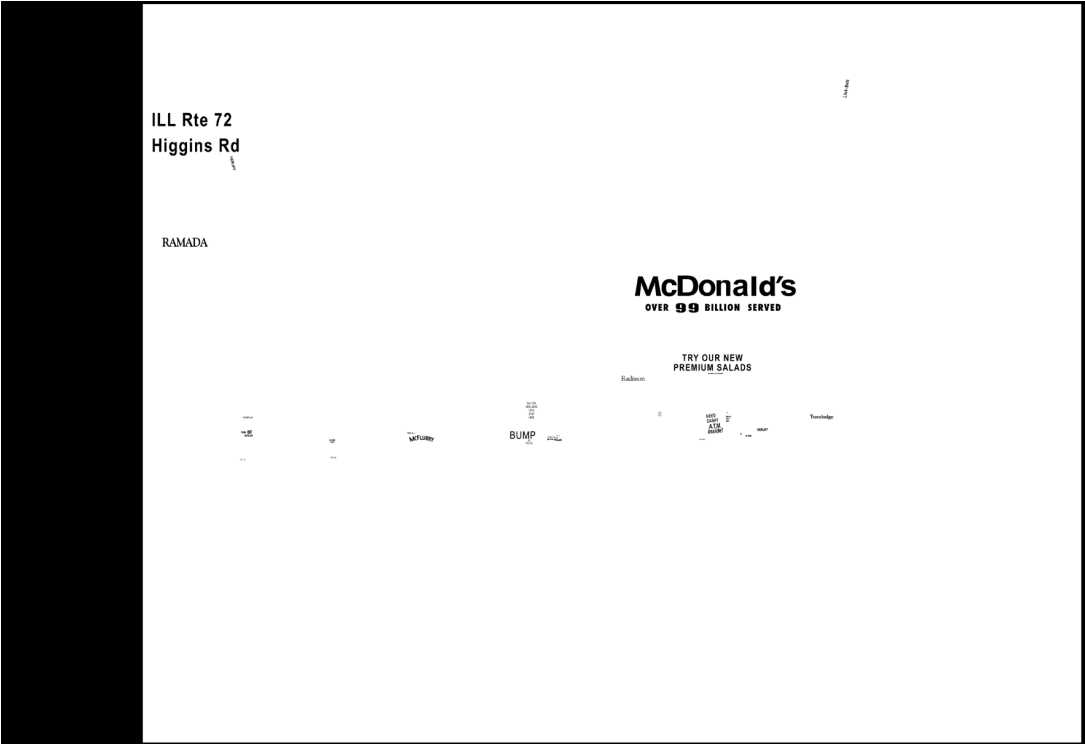




©Matt Siber, *Untitled #22*, 2003



©Matt Siber, *Untitled #17*, 2003





©Matt Siber, *Untitled #16*, 2003



©Matt Siber, *Untitled #9*, 2002

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

MATT SIBER has a Masters of Fine Arts degree in photography pending from Columbia College Chicago. His photography is part of the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago and has appeared in such publications as *Flash Art International* and *Aperture*. He is on the part-time faculty of Columbia College Chicago's photography department teaching beginning and advanced digital imaging. [email: mattsiber@hotmail.com]