



Saturday, October 3rd, 2015



## Accidentally on Purpose: Bill Beckley at Albertz Benda

by David Carrier

*The Accidental Poet: Bill Beckley—1968-1978 at Albertz Benda*

September 10 to October 3, 2015

515 W 26th Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)

New York, 212 244 2579



Installation view, "The Accidental Poet: Bill Beckley—1968-1978," 2015, at Albertz Benda.

It's customary for galleries to display their artists' newest works. That is understandable, for we want to see how these figures are developing; we usually leave it to museums to offer a broader historical perspective. But it can be very instructive, also, to study the origins of a now-celebrated artist. Bill Beckley started showing art in 1968, at the moment when change was in the air in New York. He was one of a group of now-

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legendary artists associated with the pioneering Soho Gallery at 112 Greene Street — they included Louise Bourgeois, Suzanne Harris, Gordon Matta-Clark and Dennis Oppenheim. This densely packed exhibition provides a good overview of his first decade of artmaking.



Bill Beckley, *Roses Are, Violets Are, Sugar Are*, 1974/2013.  
Cibachrome photographs, edition of 3, framed: 40.87 x 30.87  
inches. Courtesy of the artist and Albertz Benda.

“The Accidental Poet” included *Myself as Washington* (1969), a photograph that anticipates Cindy Sherman’s playful studies of personal identity; and the text with photograph *Joke About Elephants* (1974), a precursor of Richard Prince’s joke paintings. There is *Rooster, Bed, Lying* (1971), a bed underneath a chicken wire cage housing the live rooster who was present at the opening. In *Photo Document for Song for a Chin-up* (1971), which was performed by a tenor at the opening, a tenor sings while doing a chin-up. Artists of the previous generation, the Pop painters and Minimalists, who came of age in the 1960s, defined the unity of their concerns by creating distinctive visual styles — a Warhol, like a Lichtenstein or a Donald Judd, is unmistakably their personal product. Early on in his career, Beckley, as a figure of the next generation, thought differently. What links these visually varied early works together is what might best be called a consciously eccentric poetic sensibility, his irony-laced fascination with unexpected sensory pleasures.

Beckley is interested in the relationship between the ways that words and images tell stories, as in *Cake Story* (1973), in which a photograph of a piece of cake is accompanied by a short funny story musing on the commonplace expression, “you can’t have your cake and eat it too.” And he is fascinated with juxtapositions of events in the news with his photographs and texts — *Mao Dead* (1976) is a good example, with its reproduction of a headline announcing Mao’s death; two mysterious photographs and a short story about reading a newspaper. One basic, longstanding rule governing the visual arts is that pictures and words tell stories in essentially different ways, and so should not be mixed together. This is why the comic strip, that bastard art which promiscuously mixes image and text, is generally thought a marginal art form; comics, it is said, are books for weak readers who need help from images. By bringing words into his visual art, Beckley—along with some other artists of his generation such as John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, and Lawrence Weiner—decisively demonstrated that this traditional way of thinking was all wrong. In *De Kooning’s Stove* (1974), for example, his written account of de Kooning supplements our understanding of the accompanying picture of a red stove. And in *First Sexual Experience* (1974), the photographs play against the text, which they frame.

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Bill Beckley, *Paris Bistro*, 1975/2014. Cibachrome photographs, edition of 3, 78 x 40.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Albertz Benda.

Beckley is an unusual figure — a visual artist who can write — and so it's worth considering the meaning of the title of his exhibition. How did he find himself to be accidentally a poet? Beckley perhaps answers this question when he tells this story: in 1969: he was walking while painting lines directly onto the ground, making *From Sunrise to Sunset*, recording his work in photographs. He then imagined a more ambitious plan, painting a line across the Delaware River. Halfway across, however, the current took away his camera, and so, with no visual documentation remaining, his telling of the story became the work of art. When he got to ground on the other side, he discovered that he was at the spot of George Washington's famous crossing of the Delaware, a scene archived in *Photo Album—Washington Crossing, March 10 1969* (1969), which consists of a postcard showing Washington accompanied by Beckley's written commentary. By presenting the record of how he avoided making his painting, he thus created this elusive work of art, a story that (for all I know) may be totally fictional. Near the end of the period presented in this show, the first decade of his career Beckley expelled words from his art.

*Hot and Cold Faucets with Drain* (1975-1994) leaves just the visual narrative with the red (hot) faucet on the left and the blue (cold) one on the right, with the yellow drain in between. He discovered that images alone allow him to tell stories. Recently, however, it's worth noting, he's returned to writing. The story-telling impulse, so it seems, is not easy to suppress.



Bill Beckley, *Silent Ping-Pong*, 1971. Foam, aluminum, plywood, steel, netting; table: 38.5 x 48.5 x 26 inches, two paddles: 10.5 x 6.5 x 1.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Albertz Benda.

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