

At liberty?

By Erin Donnelly, July 2002.

Responses to 9/11 have balanced the immediacy of emotions with an attention towards the arena of global politics. Informed by an ongoing engagement of the space where the personal overlaps with external realities, Marc Lepson describes his latest installation “Breathe” as a meditation on claustrophobia, confinement and comfort. In relation to a social context, a primary role of this work is to articulate the experience of individuals since 9/11 in ways that counter typical media representations.

While the installation specifically addresses the detainment of hundreds of Arab, South Asian, and Muslim immigrants who have been arbitrarily and secretly rounded up since 9/11, the viewer must navigate the space as a protagonist of sorts. Control and danger are suggested by one’s tentative movements across the fragile glass tile flooring or around the narrow perimeter of the room lined with images of a Brooklyn detention center. Underscoring the sensation of confinement, a neon sign commands “breathe” as if this vital human function were unnatural to the environment where “many people whose views or accents are unpopular feel a sense of suffocation.”

Incorporating newspaper text and screen-printed imagery, a technique used in billboard production, the use of these strategies of mass communication against themselves is a strong element of Lepson’s work. Disarming the authority of the prison façade behind which dozens of immigrants are held, screen-printed patterns shift in perspective to flatten the building’s girth. Traditional Islamic textile and tile designs are evoked by the repetition of structural details that form geometric abstractions across the surface. Effective and unsettling, the fracturing of the imposing exterior speaks to the invisibility of the detained immigrants whose names have been withheld from public record.

In another component of the installation, the effect of reducing the visual hierarchy of New York Times print layout to densely packed text blocks questions the importance and priority of the field of sequenced words and phrases. As passages lifted from the page and reorganized as a cross-section of the entire text, these headers retain their symbolic value through bold and capitalized formatting. Isolated from their context where news reports compete with the larger scale of advertisements, these frankly stated headlines take on greater meaning.

In contrast to the set of master narratives generated by the mainstream, Lepson registers an alternate experience of the silenced. It is significant that the process-based work of artists acknowledges that the situation is still unfolding. “Breathe” raises important questions about the civil space of all Americans.

Erin Donnelly is the Associate Director of Visual & Media Arts Initiatives at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.