



Courtesy, J. de Haan

Angela Silver's *Etym, Shredded Dictionaries* (2007), greets viewers at the Truck gallery.

Surviving information anxiety

Three artists respond to the digital overload

CHRISTOPHER WILLARD
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

Ditdahditdit is an exhibition of works by three artists who share a common inquisitiveness about communication and what happens when methods of presenting and conveying information with language begin to break down.

The title of the exhibition is a

REVIEW
ditdahditdit,
works by Kyle Beal, Chris Gillespie and Angela Silver, on view at Truck gallery, through Feb. 10.

reminder that Morse code was once a universal system of telegraph and radio communication, but for most of us, it has become a series of incomprehensible dits and dahs. In the span of a few years, e-mail and text messaging

have proliferated. Gadgets for conveying information are quickly superseded by new gadgets and their users continually invent new shortcuts for conveying thoughts: IMHO, OMG, LOL.

Ditdahditdit presents splendid and alluring responses to this information overload that seeps into once solitary artists' studios.

A large, bushy work by Calgary artist Angela Silver greets viewers in the gallery. Her one work in the show is entitled *Etym*, meaning relating to an earlier word in a language. We could look it up except the artist, in order to create her work, has shredded the dictionaries — about 10 to 20, in fact. All that remains of the books are thin strips of alphabetic illegibility projecting a good nine inches from the wall. Taken as a whole, the strands of paper

Silver's labour-intensive method of artistic disruption suggests the *comprehension of our language system* is indeed built upon a fragile foundation. We are denied any return to the dictionary's former logic. What is gained by her endeavour, however, is a visual and tactile aesthetic. The once ordered language is now a 1.5- by 5-metre linguistic shag rug.

While we can no longer thumb the pages, we wish we could run our hands over the alphabetic strands. Talk about the sensuality of language!

The ants were marching two by two into the studio of Victoria artist Chris Gillespie and so he decided to turn the infestation into art. Over a period of two days, he filmed four hours of soundless video chronicling the ants as they crept across his window sill, up the wall, and into the ceiling. Gillespie carefully observed their route and penciled a dashed line behind them marking their path. He next placed obstacles in the path and rubbed an eraser over the dashed lines forcing the ants to detour and reconsider their route.

A nearby book has been hand-altered with paint and ink to become a book about ants. In it we learn facts worthy of a third-grade science project, such as ants make up 10 per cent of the world's biomass. As the book continues, it shifts to a diary of Gillespie's ant problem. As the ants follow their pheromone trails, Gillespie's lines clue us into the pheromone trails that comprise the ants' invisible "language" system.

The documentary video never suggests a purpose; the ants go marching and the why and where are never answered. Only by suspending our need for plot or conclusion are we able to join the artist's stream of consciousness allowing him to magnify a conveyance of information that we are ultimately excluded from using.

Montreal-based artist Kyle Beal ex-

with a little encouragement his works quickly become the loquacious guests *that just won't leave the party, in a good way*. Beal's interest is in the way language functions as part of bad puns, inspired (and insipid) jokes, and linguistic punches. Such verbal play often lingers because it comments upon cultural anxieties, subverts meanings and enjoys a particular economy of language.

Burnt Out Comedy Club is a photograph documenting a fire in a comedy club. Rubble replaces raucous laughter. Beal's wording is subtle but crucial. He prefers "burnt out" over "burned down," hinting that it stopped working because of damage. And, like the burnt-out comedian who has told the joke once too often, the question becomes one of expression. An artist, too, can also stop working because of damage — when they burn out because they feel they have nothing new to say.

Beal turns statements of failure into artistic one-liners in his photographic Word Jumble. He writes "Words Without Imagination," and then carefully projects isometric lines to each blocky letter. Another hand-drawn aphorism reads, "The New Model for Cliches and Laziness." A nearby watercolour states, "Drawing with Regular and Freudian Repression."

In a whimsical photo titled *Light-headed*, golden shafts cut across the work to obscure the artist's face. These shafts are based upon the gilded rays that stream down in Bernini's sculpture, *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*.

The punchline of this visual joke, relates to the way artists who bask in the ecstasy of their self-proclaimed genius are dangerously close to burning out, too. Beal continually forces us to consider and reconsider.

As he explains with a double negative in Word Jumble, "This Isn't What You Think It Isn't."