



HOLIDAY 2015-16

Robert Truskowski: The Conversationalist



LOST
CAUSE

Robert Truskowski, *Lost Cause*, 2015, wood, Plexiglas, LED lights. Photo: Don Hall

EXHIBITION ESSAY

ROBERT TRUSZKOWSKI: THE CONVERSATIONALIST

If we knew the present, we could calculate the future

BY BLAIR FORNWALD, ASSISTANT CURATOR

Robert Truskowski is a primarily print-based artist whose work is informed by the history and technology of print media, which is the history of mass communication and discourse as we know it. Print enables the very idea of history to exist. Although Truskowski's solo exhibition, *The Conversationalist* contains no print media, it is nonetheless deeply invested in this dialogue.

Truskowski's installation is spare, comprised of three texts rendered as illuminated channel lettering signage, appropriating the form and concise language of advertising. Generally mass-produced with aluminum channels, Plexiglas facing and internal lighting components, channel lettering is used as external signage for businesses. Truskowski's signs are exquisitely hand-crafted of

unfinished maple and glow with soft white light.

The first reads LOST CAUSE, a term for a person or thing that is beyond recovery or redemption. It is also the title of a Beck song from his melancholic 2002 album, *Sea Change*. Arguably his most personal and introspective release to date, Beck cited the breakup with his long-term girlfriend, Leigh Limon as its primary influence. Nearly all of the tracks on the album address themes of heartbreak, desolation, and loneliness. In the original video for "Lost Cause" a piñata-like effigy of the artist drifts from the sky to earth, falling apart, releasing fireworks, streamers, bursts of confetti, and a cartoonish heart from its deteriorating body, while the lyrics describe hopeless resignation and growing "tired of fighting...for a lost cause."¹



MORAL
HAZARD

Robert Truskowski, *Moral Hazard*, 2015, wood, Plexiglas, LED lights. Photo: Don Hall

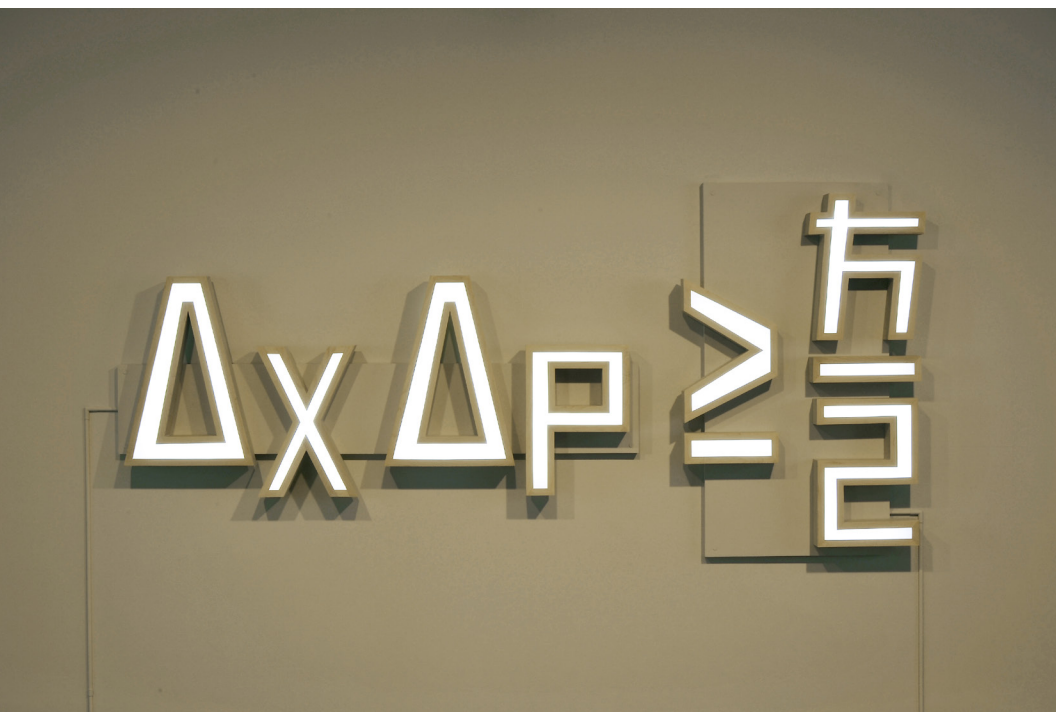
The other text piece spells out the phrase MORAL HAZARD, economic terminology that describes risks taken by one party knowing that another party will bear the burden of any failure. We routinely encounter moral hazard: a probationary employee is likely to be on their best behaviour while one who is tenured might take certain risks knowing that their position is secure. I may drive more recklessly or ignore nagging thoughts about maybe leaving the stove on since my car and home are insured. Moral hazard also presents problems on a larger economic scale. In the period preceding the American subprime mortgage crisis, for instance, highly volatile loans were being repackaged, bought and sold with such fervor that, as economist Mark Zandi explains, “no one was forced to worry about the quality of any single loan. As shaky mortgages were combined, diluting any problems into a larger pool, the incentive for responsibility was undermined.”² Large financial institutions and other “too big to fail” corporations took high-risk, high-return positions, knowing that the economic consequences of their potential failure would be so devastating that government would intervene. Any relationship that de-incentivizes accountability suffers (or perhaps benefits) from this condition.

Between Truszkowski’s two texts is a mathematical equation, Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle,

also known as the principle of indeterminacy:

$$\Delta x \Delta p \geq \frac{\hbar}{2}$$

In quantum physics, the uncertainty principle describes the limits of scientific precision and the degree to which one can determine the position and momentum of a subatomic particle such as an electron. x represents the position of a particle and p its momentum – the triangle symbols in front of each of these variables represent the errors in these values. When the two variables are multiplied together, they will always produce a number that is greater than or equal to half of the reduced Planck constant (an infinitesimally small measurement, approximately 6.626×10^{34} joule seconds divided by 2π). The uncertainty principle, writes Alok Jha, “tells us that there is a fuzziness in nature, a fundamental limit to what we can know about the behaviour of quantum particles and, therefore, the smallest scales of nature.”³ Yet it also describes real particle behavior: knowing that a particle’s position and velocity are uncertain explains how electrons are able to escape the confines of the nucleus, or leap from one energy state to another, a phenomenon known as quantum tunneling. It explains radiation. It explains how light and energy from the sun can reach us. The philosophical implications are also profound. As Heisenberg writes,



Robert Truskowski, *Uncertainty Principle*, 2015, wood, Plexiglas, LED lights. Photo: Don Hall

“In the sharp formulation of the causal law—if we know the present, we can calculate the future—it is not the conclusion that is wrong but the premise.”⁴

There is a fourth text component to Truskowski’s exhibition, which is its title, *The Conversationalist*. It is a generous offering to the viewer, framing the exhibition as a site for free association, gameful inquiry, and subjective interpretation. To offer one such interpretation: these three pieces function not so much as signage but as semiotic signs, signifying cultural, scientific, or economic discursive fields or bodies of production. More broadly, each may be understood as a signifier of the unknown or unpredictable – on scales both macro and micro. Brought together and framed as a conversation, the work may also signify the relationship between a reader and a text, or a viewer and an artwork; a relationship with an unknown other taking place in what semiotician Roland Barthes refers to as a “site of bliss.”⁵ Here, meaning is “precarious, revocable, reversible,”⁶ liberating the reader from the authority of the text.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Robert Truskowski was born in Hamilton and now resides in Regina where he is Associate Professor of Print Media in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Regina. He holds a BFA (2000) from Queen’s University and an MFA (2004) from Concordia University. Truskowski has exhibited and lectured across Canada, the USA, and internationally, and is represented by Slate Fine Art Gallery in Regina. He wishes to thank the Saskatchewan Arts Board for their generous support of this project.

¹ Beck, “Lost Cause” from *Sea Change*, Geffin, 2002, LP.

² Mark Zandi, *Financial Shock: A 360° Look at the Subprime Mortgage Implosion, and How to Avoid the Next Financial Crisis*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2008), 3.

³ Alok Jha, “What is Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle? How the sun shines and why the vacuum of space is not actually empty” *The Guardian* 10 November 2013. Accessed 10 October 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/nov/10/what-is-heisenbergs-uncertainty-principle>.

⁴ Werner Heisenberg, Note 1, 197, quoted in David C. Cassidy, *Beyond Uncertainty: Heisenberg, Quantum Physics, and the Bomb* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2009), 162.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Millar (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*



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CAUSE

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LOST
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Robert Truskowski, *The Conversationalist* installation view, 2015. Photo: Don Hall



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COVER IMAGE

Robert Truskowski, *Lost Cause* (detail), 2015, wood, Plexiglas, LED lights. Photo: Don Hall



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