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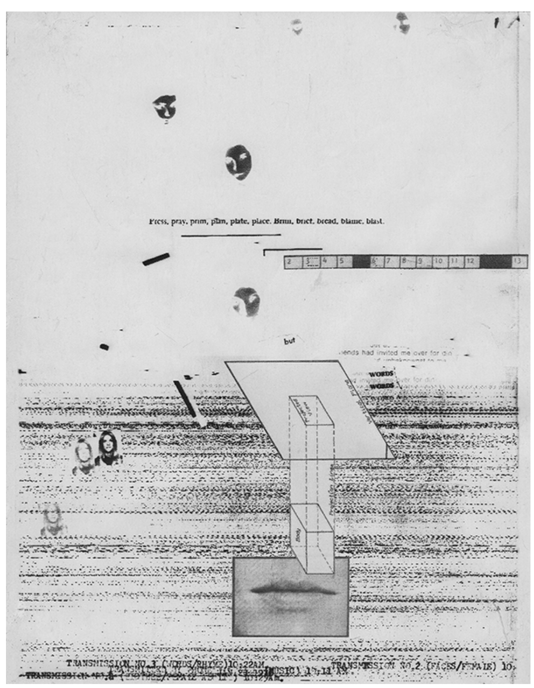
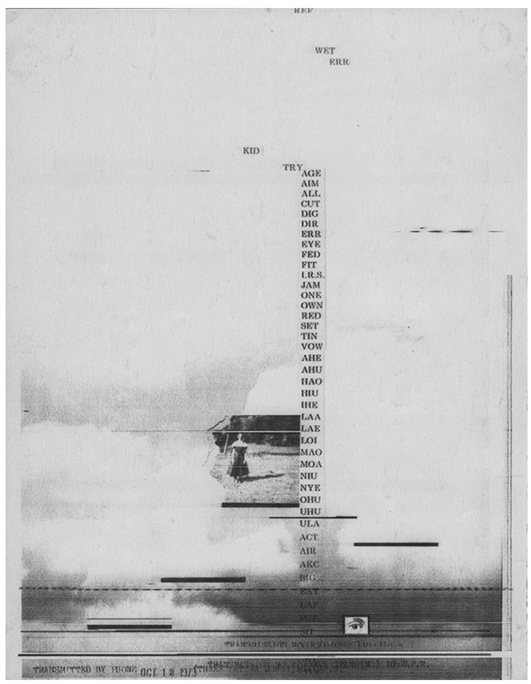
William Larson: Fireflies at Gitterman Gallery

The constant stream of digital information traveling around us over wires and airways is an increasingly recognized phenomenon. Over the past two decades, many artists have begun exploring the seemingly limitless possibilities of digital communication. However, long before the integration of once-mysterious electronic media into the art world in the 1990s, William Larson used a Graphic Sciences DEX 1 Teleprinter to produce some of the earliest digitally generated artworks, in his series *Fireflies* (1969–78). The DEX 1—a sophisticated predecessor to the fax machine of the 1970s and the computer technology developed in the 1980s—allowed Larson to translate sound (music and voice), text, and photographic elements into electronic signals that were then transmitted over a telephone line and burned into carbon paper by the device's stylus, rendering what he calls a high-definition "electronic drawing." Each unique, grayscale print combines graphic marks and photo collage to produce a visual stutter of image, text, and line; like a cross-section of a hurricane, Larson's work highlights possible instants in the continuum of images electronically whirling around us everyday.



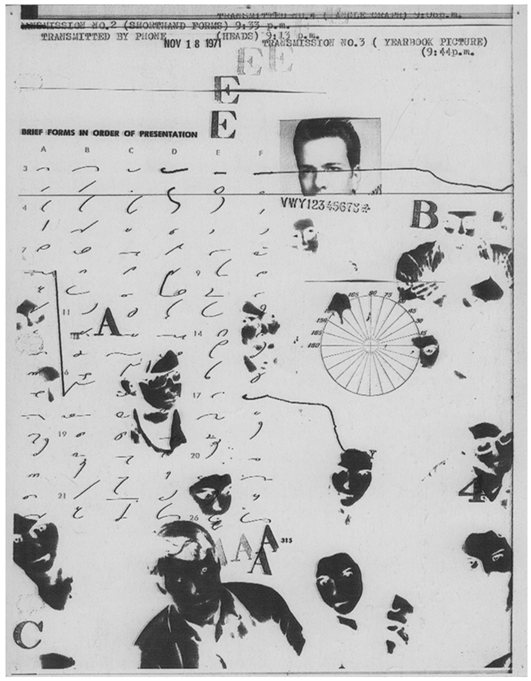
Untitled, c. 1969–78; electro-carbon print; 11 x 8 ½ in. © William Larson. Courtesy of Gitterman Gallery.

Strongly influenced by László Moholy-Nagy and Constructivist collages from the early 20th century, Larson treats both image and text as decontextualized signs. While their original denotations cannot be ignored—body parts, plants, clouds, and lettering remain recognizable—the combination of these references in the untitled compositions become a garbled visual language that speaks as if in tongues to our cultural understanding of what images signify. In one print, negatives of faces become floating black masks while the majority of a nude male torso and legs hang from the top edge, and a man with a black bar over his eyes is positioned at the bottom edge next to a corner of clouds. Scraps of words form uneven horizons; the legible sections read, "documented medical evidence indicates that's exactly what," "Noo," "see," and "does." A viewer's natural impulse to decode these fractured messages echoes the sensation of trying to recall a disintegrating memory; it feels like there must be a relationship between the elements, but the points are too far apart to make any real connection.



Untitled, 1973; electro-carbon print; 11 x 8 ½ in. © William Larson. Courtesy of Gitterman Gallery.

Larson writes that he instinctually wanted to remove the DEX 1 machine's cover to explore the possibilities of the electronics inside. In his experimentation, he began composing images in clear plastic sleeves, which he then transmitted via the DEX 1's drum scanner and optical printer. Interfering with this process, which kept the image in motion during the six-minute transmission, allowed him to manipulate the images while they were being read and written by the machine. Larson altered the electrical voltage output during the thermal printing, stretching out whatever information was being rendered, and even inserted crumpled pieces of paper that were compressed, creating a marbled pattern. Larson's integration of sound is the apex of his mischievous exploitation of the DEX 1's capabilities. Because the teleprinting process translates all information into binary electronic code, Larson could speak or play music into a telephone connected to the machine, and the sonic signal would layer with the photographic collage. The resulting visualization of sound generates rows of linear static that vary in density. In some places, where Larson fiddled with the voltage output, the lines escape their taught horizontality and loosen into waves that undulate across the picture plane.



Untitled, 1971; electro-carbon print; 11 x 8 ½ in. © William Larson. Courtesy of Gitterman Gallery.

The series' title, *Fireflies*, refers to the sparks that occur when the DEX 1's stylus burns images into the carbon paper, but this description does not do the works justice. The literal association between the luminescent insects and the flickering stylus can be expanded to create a metaphorical correlation with the characteristics of Larson's visual language—a scintillating illumination of information in which the viewer endeavors to find narrative but always fails. Instead of reification, Larson opts for obfuscation, weaving foggy voids into the compositions. Each mark made on the carbon paper is indeed the result of a mechanical firefly, but collectively they are also insights into Larson's investigation of the nature of representation.

William Larson: Fireflies *is on view at Gitterman Gallery through July 2, 2015.*