

The Artist in the Archive: The Discoveries of Kirsten Stolle

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Only You Can Prevent A Forest challenges viewers to examine the often-assumed differences between art and science with boundary-crossing works. Artist Kirsten Stolle's works collectively show that categories of art and science are determined not by universal axioms but by practices that circumscribe bodies of knowledge. Our realities are constructed by social forces that we shape through our actions. These artworks draw on corporate archives to collectively form an alternative archive of the artists' ideas about the social impacts of the agrichemical industry.

Kirsten Stolle is a visual artist working in collage, drawing, and mixed-media who often focuses on food politics and biotechnology. In this exhibition, Stolle extends her work into addressing the connection between chemical companies and the U.S. military. What most distinguishes her engagements with corporate language and image is her research-based practice grounded in the investigation of corporate propaganda. Stolle's aesthetic strategies are not focused on the technical details of the chemicals, but rather on the context of the art-science work.

Stolle's potent mix of text and materials carry the weight of historical and current choices in many areas of life through chemical company influence, creating works that include ink prints, collages, pop-art references, site-specific sculpture, and salon-style gallery walls. Text is made material: viewers are asked to dwell on the words of the exhibition's title as a green neon light sculpture, and on those found in *Faith, Hope and \$5,000* (2017), repurposed from the title of Dan Forrester's corporate history of the Monsanto Chemical Company.¹ By giving these texts material

¹ Dan Forrester, *Faith, Hope & \$5,000* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977).

heft, Stolle illuminates these companies' intentions.

The *Science For A Better Life* series (2020-2022) repurposes thirty years of aggressive advertising campaign images and texts from Bayer, Monsanto, and Dow Chemical, which marketed their toxic products in popular magazines. Using the conventions of erasure poetry, Stolle's work reveals by obscuring.² She collages, cuts, and draws, redacting texts to reveal connections. The distinctions between government and corporations fall away so viewers are invited to think of the use of these supposed divisions within the agrichemical sector. Left with an erasure text like: "New Hunters: Monsanto killers solve problems," from the *New Hunters* (2022) collage based on a 1965 advertisement, the artist's new texts prove sticky. This invites viewers to hold on to these words, so that when they encounter *Plant Protection* (2022), they are primed to read this towering assemblage of plastic pesticide bottles covered in gold glitter as an absurdity of gilded toxic greed.

In one of the six *HERBS* (2022) collages, we encounter a wide strip of bright orange vinyl pressed against a letterpressed quote from a Bayer CEO explaining that when Bayer acquired Monsanto in 2018, the Monsanto name would be subsumed under the Bayer corporation. The quote asserts that the Bayer name had been chosen for the company because of "strong, positive recognition" among consumers, as opposed to Monsanto's dubious international reputation. Stolle memorializes this act of naming and the power companies have to disconnect themselves from histories through mergers, acquisitions, and speech-acts. In doing so, she draws attention to the company's greenwashing tactics and insisting on the long lives of corporations and the lasting

² Erasure poetry was recently used to great effect in *Redaction: A Project*, a project by visual artists and filmmaker Titus Kaphar and poet Reginald Dwayne Betts to explore ethical and current documents related to bail, court fees, and fines for the MoMA PS1's Spring 2019 exhibition.

effects of corporate decision-making, which ultimately can be influenced by social values. The most striking work on the *HERBS* salon wall is an exploration of the lesser-known color-named Rainbow Herbicides used in the American invasion of Việt Nam. The herbicides were named for the color-coded bands around the 55-gallon drums used to ship and store the chemicals.³ As the reality of what these colors mean sinks into viewer's minds, the colors are transformed from pop-ish fun to blazing warnings.

Stolle's work not only gleans from corporate fields but also plants new ideas for viewers. Art-science work can be thought of in four major categories: conveyance, contributive, contextual, and critical modes.⁴ Stolle's artworks carry all of these categories. Combined, they offer viewers new discoveries about relationships for which they may have never seen textual evidence. Information is being conveyed through this but so are critical modes with which viewers can approach these details with an understanding of the broader context of corporate connections. This gives rise to the most exciting aspect to Stolle's work: its potential to contribute new knowledge by bringing together newly formed strands of thought which can form into new narratives for viewers.

The artist in the archive returns to us with innovative ways to visualize social realities and relationships achieved through seductive colors and forms that draw us into textual complications. Even as the artist reveals our condition through dystopic histories, her works lead viewers toward awareness of Bayer-Monsanto and Dow's greenwashing by exposing their

³ A. L. Young, *The History, Use, Disposition and Environmental Fate of Agent Orange* (New York: Springer, 2009).

⁴ Along with Megan K. Halpern, I offered a preliminary version of this typology which can help to analyze the contributions of projects at the intersection of art and science. See Rogers and Halpern, "Art-Science Collaborations, Complexities, and Challenges," in *Routledge Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology*, 3rd edition, eds. Massimiano Bucchi and Brian Trench, 214-237 (New York: Routledge, 2021).

historical connections to warfare and encouraging viewers toward curiosity about the role of such companies in their everyday lives. Stolle's works leave open the possibility of the better future chemical companies could never provide: the future Stolle has planted through these artworks.