

# Unsettling News

*Contemporary artworks examine  
the state of the news cycle*

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**Dr. Riva Symko**

As the focus of news content has shifted, the authority of the journalistic voice changed, and fresh technological platforms emerged, what is considered news, who reports it, and where it will be consumed has become the steady buzz in the backdrop of each of our daily lives. Most of the time it goes unnoticed, or remains vaguely audible, but every so often there is something—a particularly outrageous headline, an unexpected character, an unusual delivery—that causes a sharp glitch in the buzz. Since the beginning of the twentieth-century artists have turned to newspapers, news magazines, and television news shows for rich sources of glitch-inducing material. *Headlines: The Art of the News Cycle* features seven

contemporary artists who have appropriated, combined, and mimicked news images and headlines from a variety of sources—but most notably from the steadfast newspaper. Through painting, embroidery, video, collage, and printmaking the artists represented in this catalogue have created interpretations that unsettle our experience of the daily news cycle. Like a newspaper article, the artworks in this exhibition are all informed by the structure and ordering of news texts—that is, the words, phrases, images, and platforms that make up our news. Unlike our daily newsfeeds, however, these artworks reveal the fundamental connection between text and aesthetics that is generally taken for granted and, in doing so, expose something

about process and construction, particularly the production and construction of the news in the twenty-first century.

Ron Terada has been using text appropriated from a variety of pop cultural and art historical sources for several decades. His “found text” paintings reflect an aesthetics of information, power, and technology as much as they refer to the traditions of Modern, Conceptual, and Postmodern Art. For these works, Terada selected fonts that would demonstrate a critical relationship to the chosen content. He adhered printed vinyl text to a painted canvas, re-painted over its entirety in a monochromatic hue, and then removed each letter to leave a floating contrast between the

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**Myriam Dion**

*Smog shrouding the India Gate war memorial in New Delhi,  
The New York Times, November 1920-2018 (detail), 2019*

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text and the ground. The title of his latest series, *TL; DR*, is internet shorthand for “too long; didn’t read”—which pokes fun at our individual and cultural lack of attention span. Each of the forty-four black and white paintings in Terada’s *TL; DR 2* (2017-2018) contain a headline that has been reproduced from the American technology news website *The Verge* but in the recognizable typeface Cheltenham of *The New York Times*. Founded in 1851, the globally distributed daily *NYT* newspaper has established itself, for better or worse, as the apex of accurate, factual, trustworthy news reporting. Compared with independently owned *The Verge*, which has only been publishing for ten years, the visual design, treatment, and font of the *NYT* has now come to symbolize truth and authority itself.

For Terada, “there was something in the breathlessness and sheer variety” of *The Verge* headlines on any given day that compelled him to start clipping and saving them: the “typeface doesn’t portray the feeling of news”, he reflects, “even the wording of their headlines doesn’t read like proper news; they’re too pop culture-inflected, too bizarre to be true, as if the news in question were fake.”<sup>1</sup> Despite how the headlines read, *The Verge* does, indeed, report (f)actual news. For Terada, *The Verge* simply represents how journalism operates these days:

“it acknowledges and indulges in click bait. It’s the language of the smartphone-tablet generation and it’s geared specifically towards a younger audience/readership (not an aging Gen-Xer like me).”<sup>2</sup> He asks us to think about these formal attributes as tools of information consumption. For instance, does the monumentality of this salon-style wall of paintings give the headlines a sense of accuracy, authenticity, or legitimacy? Or is its very presence in the gallery an absurdity that makes us doubt their truthfulness? If so, where does that leave our perceptions of the “real” news?

Dianna Frid has described her practice (which includes artist’s books, sculpture, collage, drawing, installation, and textiles) as a “corporeal and philosophical reflection on the physical and lexical nature of material.”<sup>3</sup> One of her primary aims is to reproduce an aesthetic and conceptual experience out of physical reality. In particular, Frid credits the cadences of reading, writing, sewing, breathing, and thinking as integral to her process. In her words, “texts are sensuous experiences that embrace syntax but also exceed it through substance, color, and form.”<sup>4</sup>

All of the words and phrases depicted in Frid’s *Words from Obituaries* series are culled from the *New York Times* Obituaries section. Frid reads through the

section on a weekly basis, looking for phrases that are “just right”, and making note of those particular moments of language that both resonate with the life of the deceased, and operate outside of their source as an evocative fragment of text on their own. For example, the phrase “HIT-MEINTHEFACEWITHABOARD”, as embroidered into Frid’s piece, *NYT, SEPT 1, 2019, BOBBY DILLON* (2021), is a snippet borrowed from the obituary of a one-eyed American defensive football player whose opponents would knowingly and strategically tackle him from his blind side. As she “collects” the texts, Frid archives each one according to the date it was published, and the name of the deceased. She then further classifies each selection into a color-coded system of her own creation based loosely on the deceased’s occupation. For instance, athletes are classified as blue, educators as red, artists as orange and, most recently, Frid has begun to collect the obituaries of war criminals, who are indicated in grey. In the final work, Frid removes any spaces and punctuation, and stitches the words into graphite-covered paper that is mounted on canvas—the colour of the embroidery thread in each artwork corresponding to its classification. The result inspires a slow reading and an appreciation for the material inclinations of language, which would otherwise remain unnoticed.

A text exemplifying the structure of both ‘symbol’ and ‘sign,’ in the way Frid’s series does, would be an instance of what twentieth-century Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva defined as ‘intertextuality’—or the relationship between texts. After all, obituaries themselves form a public, yet meditative reflection on the life of an individual. It is often the only time that person’s name ever appears in the news, and might be the only lasting report of a person’s life, or the single place their story may ever be recorded. At the same time, it also gently yet brutally signifies their death.

Stan Douglas’s *Television Spots* (1987-1988) also draw attention to the construction of media. These twelve short video sequences were originally inserted between regular advertisements running on *CBC TV* in 1989. Unannounced and without introductions of any kind, one of the fifteen to thirty-second-long spots was aired on a nightly basis as part of the scheduled blocks of broadcasting. In the editing, the *Spots* correspond with conventional film and television practices from the period. Yet the content, the drama of the action (or lack thereof), and the subjects depicted, are contrary to our usual expectations as viewers. Most viewers try to watch the *TV Spots* narratively. However, the imagery only depicts empty places,



or everyday banal actions and events—things that are usually edited out from a tv show, advertisement, or film scene. Each of the videos includes a corresponding photograph depicting the original location of each scene, together with a text panel describing the scenarios of each *TV Spot*. The context of encountering the *TV Spots* on television as “ads” is far different than viewing them in

an art gallery. As Miriam Nichols has written, an art audience is “already practiced in laying bare the device.”<sup>5</sup> The surprise and confusion of the tv viewer is experienced as studied criticality by a gallery-goer.

Throughout his career, Douglas has been exploring the histories, construction, obsolescence, and reemergence of technology in

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**Dianna Frid**

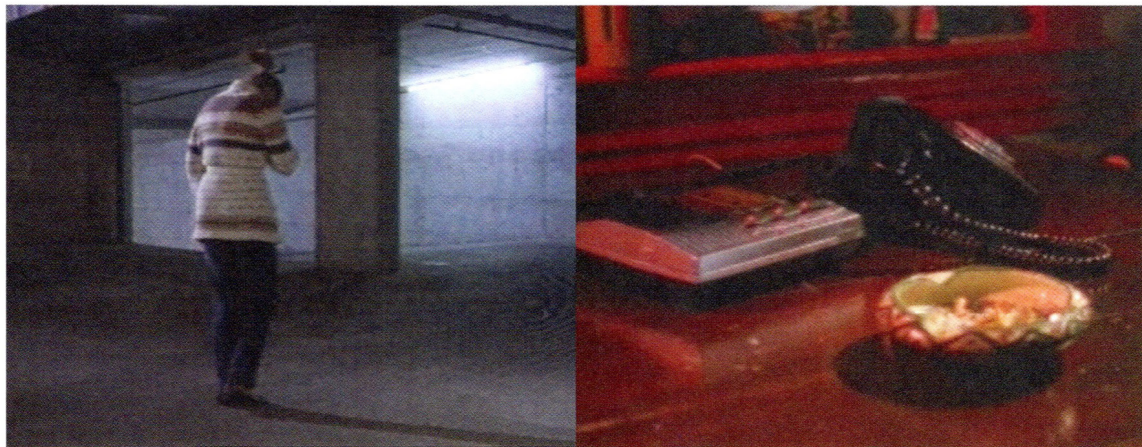
selections from *Words from Obituaries*, 2011—2022  
Photo by Hans Hallinen

photography, cinema, and television. His work destabilizes the subjectivity of both his viewers and his characters, and problematizes gender, race, and class. In the *TV Spots*, Nichols explains that “we can identify the economic marginality of Douglas’s subjects either by their occupations (box office worker, ice-cream man), their activities (riding buses), or by the sites in which they are placed. These people are just the sort who do not fit into the main-

life in all its particularity.”<sup>6</sup> The *TV Spots* frustrate our ability to distance ourselves from the manufacturing of the media spectacle.

The least explicit use of text in the form of A to Z in this exhibition comes in Ron Gorsline’s painted cacophony of signs and symbols—visual texts. It is clear, when one first walks into his studio, that Gorsline loves painting—that he loves experimenting with the textures and consistencies of the

from the late 1990’s focused on developing his personal, sometimes even autobiographical, iconography as a means to investigate the traditional role of the artist—painter, specifically—in a pluralistic, and technology-driven culture. Cameras, televisions, computers, binoculars, fleur-de-lis, birds, cubes, burning cigarettes, coffee cups, tables, and chairs are just some of the objects that appear and reappear as a discordant, painted pastiche



stream of consumer society, and who therefore have been most thoroughly expunged from the dominant mode of representation. (Compare the “average” person in the *Spots* with the “average” character in a television commercial.) The people of the *Spots* are part of a growing number of invisibles, the anonymous ones of North American society who have been left out in the cold. The *TV Spots* demonstrate the possibility of representing them...through a language of detail that figures a

medium itself, and that he loves to create, and surround himself, with colour, layers upon layers of it. This is all the more impressive given that Gorsline’s career has traversed through several decades worth of debates regarding the so-called “death of painting”. His painterly determination is as evident as his commitment to the medium which, over the years, has resulted in his own critical examination, and re-examination, of his authorial place in the world. Many of Gorsline’s works

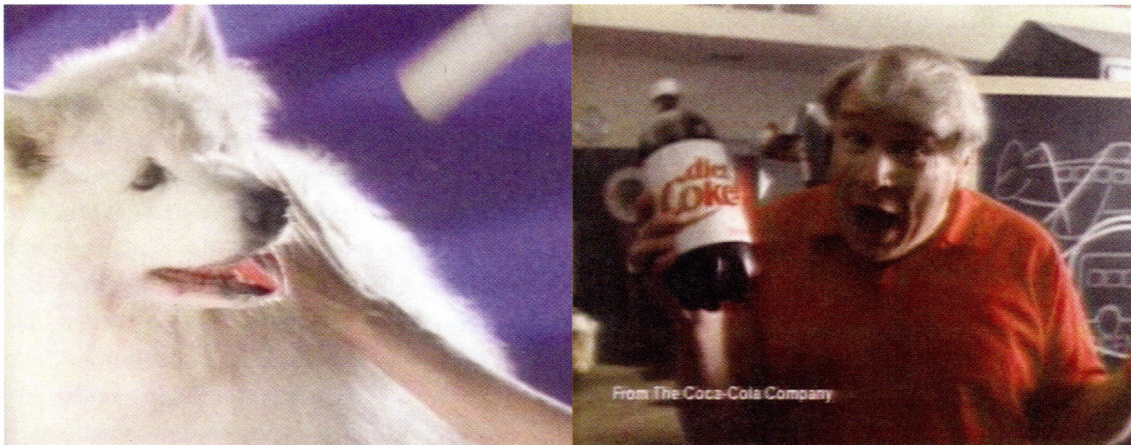
throughout Gorsline’s oeuvre. *I Read the News Today* includes several of these recurring visual motifs in a dark and somewhat sinister scene interpreting the anxiety so many of us feel when we consume the news. Stories about climate change, war, political unrest, gun violence, and economic meltdown can seem like an inescapable part of our daily news consumption. Although keeping up with the latest news allows us to stay informed, it can quickly become overwhelming

and, in many cases, lead to the particularly twenty-first century psychological phenomenon of “news anxiety”. This painting is one of the ways in which Gorsline has consolidated and shared his experiences and impressions of the media-saturated landscape we all face every day.

Myriam Dion’s work exploits the materiality of newsprint for a highly aesthetic purpose. Dion collects stacks of newspa-

pers or the individual words on the original newsprint used in these mosaics, you cannot help but see the time and manual labour that must have been involved in their production. In fact, the artist says, “I conceive my work like a gift of my time. I wish to give that tranquility to viewers, that they can use this time to contemplate with attention and let themselves sink in the act of observation”—a gentle alternative to our more ubiquitous practice of passing over

concept which remains in her current works, reinforced by the fact that all of her mosaics are framed in an effort to help conserve them. Later, she became more interested in the content of the newspaper and in completely transforming its properties as an object of consumption. Often, Dion chooses to use dramatic news stories that fool the viewer with delicacy and beautiful pattern—belying the violence and darkness of the subject. The airy



pers from newsstands across her home-base in Montreal, from speciality vintage document shops, and on her travels. She then uses an X-Acto knife and stencils to cut away at the papers until she has several piles of chopped-up texts and photographs of the news-of-the-day. Ornament, pattern, delicacy, craftsmanship. These are some of the words that might describe the painstaking and detailed process of the artist. Even if you cannot fully distinguish the precise headline, the full image,

news headlines quickly, passively, and expendably. This, despite the ultimately disposable, low-cost, flimsy, and deteriorating nature of newsprint itself. To encourage this idea, in several of her collages Dion adds gold leafing to create a material tension between the poverty of the newsprint base and the preciousness of the gold.

Early on in her practice, Dion was primarily interested in using paper-cutting and newspapers in order to explore ephemerality—a

fragility of works like *California Blazes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Saturday/Sunday*, August 22-23 (2020) stands in compelling juxtaposition to the heavy, terrifying content of the news story itself. Even the configuration of each finished collage relates, in some way, to the news story. *Ruth Bader Ginsburg*, *New York*, Tuesday June 15, 1993 (2021) was completed in the shape of one of Ginsburg’s signature lace collars. Similarly, *Place Rouge*, *Moscou - Le respect du confinement est contrôlé grâce*

à un “système intelligent de surveillance,” 31 mars 2020, *Le Devoir* (2020) is reminiscent of a Russian scarf. Dion always includes specific details of the news story in the title so viewer has a clue as to the source and content of the piece. In that way, the body of her oeuvre acts like an aestheticized archive of printed news.

Pierre Ayot is sometimes described as a late twentieth-century ‘Pop Artist’ whose work functions as fine art while making use of everyday objects drawn from the artist’s immediate environment (like buckets, boxes, clothes hangers, drinking straws, paint rollers), and cultural and commercial sources (like books, film reels, advertisements, photographs, and, of course, newspapers). For the work in this exhibition, Ayot (who began his career as a printmaker) silkscreened a random, appropriated image of the front page of the October 29, 1981 edition of the *Free Press* onto eight raw canvases, which he then sewed together and stuffed to look like newspaper bundles thrown fresh from the presses. Although Ayot’s oeuvre encompasses a wide variety of styles and processes, much of it embodies the characteristic ambivalence of Pop Art. For instance, is the choice of object in his sculptural rendering of the *Winnipeg Free Press* (1981) an enthusiastic endorsement of the capitalist market and the media goods it circulates?

Or is it a cultural critique of the speed at which we produce, distribute, consume, and dispose of our daily news? Either way, in the context of *Headlines*, this faux bundle of newspapers also acts as an homage to the newspaper itself. Originally created for the exhibition, *Post-Pop Realism: The Winnipeg Perspective* at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1982, Ayot’s pile of newspaper pillows are simultaneously charming, alluring, puzzling, and mordant.

For an exhibition inspired by news, it seemed fitting to commission a printmaker to interrogate the continued role of newspapers in the twenty-first century (printed or digital or otherwise). Besides sharing a common obsession with ink, paper, and reproducibility, contemporary printmakers both wrestle with and embrace the so-called antiquated technology of the printing press. Similarly, today’s newspaper publishers struggle, among other things, to defend the necessity of reliable, objective, ethical reporting in a context of citizen journalists, digital activists, or other non-professionals sharing news anonymously and instantly to an infinite scope of online platforms.

No stranger to navigating historical repositories of cultural artifacts, Winnipeg printmaker Miriam Rudolph’s previous artist book project, *Layered Histories: Perspectives on Colonization*

*from the Chaco* (2021) explored the Paraguay collection housed in storage at the British Museum in London. In the series of sixteen prints commissioned for the *Headlines* exhibition, titled *Storied Land: (Re)Mapping Winnipeg* (2022), Rudolph searched deep into the physical and digital archives of the *Winnipeg Free Press*. She pulled direct quotations from news stories dating as far back as 1872 and collaged them together to form a new narrative. The result is a revisionist description of the land and water-claim histories of her own Mennonite settler ancestors as they intersected with the Métis and Indigenous communities that had already been established on those lands and water-ways. Rudolph’s project demonstrates the ways in which newspapers function as important historical documents beyond their daily duty to inform on social, political, and community stories.

Rudolph is quick to note that what most stood out to her over the course of her research was not, in fact, the massive aggregate of information available in the archives. Rather, it was precisely the information that was *not* available—those peoples, communities, and stories which were never recorded as news, perhaps even deliberately excluded from reporting—that was most glaring. For example, the 2016 report *Buried Voices: Changing Tones*, published by Journalists

for Human Rights, found that from June 1, 2013 to May 31, 2014, a meagre 0.3% of news stories in Ontario broadly covered Indigenous peoples, topics, politics, or issues (an average of about 10 stories per day), despite Indigenous peoples representing 2% of the province's population.<sup>7</sup> By the last year of the study, June 1, 2015 to March 31, 2016, that number had increased to only 0.5% (24.9 stories per day), with 11% of those stories characterized as depicting negative bias or adverse sentiments towards Indigenous issues.<sup>8</sup> As Robert Harding discovered in his own 2006 study, the marginalization of Indigenous issues from news media has "remained constant over the last century and a half."<sup>9</sup>

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the vast majority of articles related to Indigenous histories in Manitoba that Rudolph was able to find contained racist, derogatory language that diminished Indigenous issues—particularly those pertaining to land and water claims. Rudolph lays these bare in all their disturbing reality, with prints such as her pair of text and image prints tracing the forced removal of Rooster Town's Métis residents in the 1950s. Perhaps more than any other media sector, news coverage influences who and what is important enough to be part of local, national, and international dialogues and, by extension, histories. Therefore, as the results of *Storied Land*

implies, it is crucial that the future of news media include more equitable representations of the communities they serve.

To one degree or another, the seven artists included in this exhibition have all employed the politicized texts of the news media as visual imagery in ways that allow for an unsettled consideration of the various component parts of the news in relation to our broader contemporary context. Here, news and media texts are the conceptual basis for distinct material practices that translate the linguistic into the tangible. The news into the aesthetic. The medium into the message.

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*Dr. Riva Symko is Head of Collections and Exhibitions and Curator of Canadian Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Previously, Dr. Symko held posts with institutions such as the Kimura Gallery, University of Alberta Museums, and Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre. She has also held a number of academic positions, including Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Alaska Anchorage, and has taught at the University of Lethbridge, Memorial University, and Queen's University.*

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## Endnotes

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- 1 Tom McDonough and Ron Terada, "Time is Different Now", *Canadian Art*, March 9 2020, <https://canadianart.ca/features/ron-terada-time-is-different-now/>
- 2 Ron Terada as quoted in private email correspondence with the author, October 2022.
- 3 Artadia, "Artadia's Summer Open Studio presents Dianna Frid", press release, August 1<sup>st</sup> 2013, [http://www.arteryarchives.org/pdf/Dianna\\_Frid\\_ARTADIA\\_pressR.pdf](http://www.arteryarchives.org/pdf/Dianna_Frid_ARTADIA_pressR.pdf)
- 4 Dianna Frid quoted in *Dianna Frid: It Takes Time*, University Galleries of Illinois State University, 2017, <https://galleries.illinoisstate.edu/exhibitions/2017/frid-dianna/>
- 5 Miriam Nichols, Stan Douglas: Television Spots, Winnipeg Art Gallery: 1988, p.7.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 7 Journalists for Human Rights, *Buried Voices: Changing Tones—An Examination of Media Coverage of Indigenous Issues in Ontario*, Media Monitoring Report: 2013-2016, pp. 7-10, <https://jhr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/JHR-IRP-Report-v3online.pdf>
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Robert Harding, "Historical representations of aboriginal people in the Canadian news media", *Discourse & Society*, SAGE: London, 2006, pp. 205-235.