

JOHN FEKNER

BROKEN PROMISES



curated by Jani Pirnat and Brad Downey

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John Fekner (New York City, 1950) began writing poetry as a teenager, and his first outdoor graffiti - in 1968 - consisted of the words *Itchycoo Park*, the title of a hit Song by Small Faces recorded a year earlier. The piece was painted in large white letters on a building in Gorman Park, 85th Street in Queens, New York. From that point until the early 1980s, Fekner carried out an anonymous guerrilla graffiti action called "Warning Signs": site-specific actions involving over three hundred conceptual works comprising dates, words, and symbols, that highlighted dangerous conditions in the city, emphasizing concepts of perception and transformation.

In 1977, Fekner began creating hand-cut cardboard stencils called "word-signs." He used them in combination with spray paint on locations ranging from the industrial districts of Queens to the South Bronx, as if the city itself were taking a stand on various environmental and social issues (such as decay in certain areas, human greed, pollution, criticism of the mass media, and displacement of native residents from New York...). His interventions mainly focused on areas urgently needing construction, demolition, or reconstruction, highlighting their decay; through his work, he aimed to attract the attention of institutions, call city officials into question, and prompt social organizations and local communities to take greater responsibility and act.

Although his early projects, such as *Growth Decay*, *Industrial Fossil*, *Urban Decay*, *Decay/Abandoned*, *Instant This*, *Instant That*, and *The Remains of Industry*, were not intended to be permanent, they were most effective when the problems they addressed were resolved.

In 1980, Fekner began creating indoor installations on the walls and windows of "Fashion 时髦 Moda MODA" a space opened by Stephen Eins at Bowery 98 in the East Village to support experimental art and cultural exchange; a venue for presenting lesser known art forms from graffiti, breakdancing, and rap to a broader audience.

Two years later, he organized the exhibition *From The Monkey To The Monitor*, showcasing metallic extraterrestrial invaders inspired by the 1978 arcade video game. The show was created in collaboration with fellow American artist Don Leicht. During those years, alongside Leicht, Fekner was a prominent figure within the New York cultural scene, alongside other renowned street artists like Keith Haring, David Wojnarowicz, and Jenny Holzer.

In 1981, teacher Martin Nisenholtz invited Fekner, Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Crash to experiment with Telidon at the Alternate Media Center at New York University, a pioneering computer graphics system.

In 1983, Fekner formed *City Squad*, a band composed of teenagers who had previously assisted him with his outdoor stencil works. Given his use of computer technology in his creative projects, it was no surprise that he also experimented with early speech synthesis programs in his first LP, *2 4 5 7 9 11/Rock Steady* (1983), and in the cult album *Idioblast* (1984), which was reissued after 40 years. Fekner is a generous artist, open to collaboration with anyone who shares his critical spirit and unconventional approach to art. Over the past 60 years, he has exhibited in numerous galleries and created projects, murals, music, and videos.

What is he doing today?

According to his website, he writes: "My latest works include temporary paintings and online projects using the web as a social workspace for musical and video collaborations. I believe that this new material represents a new way of thinking for any artist, regardless of age or field of specialization. Whatever discipline you choose, it is beneficial for an artist to be progressive and to challenge themselves, exploring beyond familiar territories. By immersing oneself in uncertainty, artists face new challenges and can discover innovative solutions in unexpected ways."

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