

CHICAGO ARTIST WRITERS

Liz Vitlin “Liz’s Childhood Computer: 2003-2005” at Prairie

By June Plekkenpol | December 2, 2022



Liz Vitlin, "DSC02040.JPG [September 30, 2005]", inkjet print, 2022. Photo courtesy of Prairie.

When Liz Vitlin and I first met to talk about her show *Liz’s Childhood Computer: 2003-2005* at Prairie, she explained to me: there is an eight year old girl in the computer. I am going into the computer to organize, archive, and care for her.

Liz was a child obsessed with documenting the interiority of her bedroom. When she was eight her father, a hardware engineer from the Soviet Union, made her a personal computer. This is the background of the work, she explained, and pointed to the text pieces in the show, each 8.5” x 11” mounted in acrylic: *Liz’s*

Veteran Letter.doc [January 31, 2005] is a note to a teacher asking to volunteer with veterans in Ohio. *Synonyms #1.doc* [February 24, 2005] is a list of synonyms—although there are no synonyms on the list, she laughs. *Planning for Kirsten.doc* [February 10, 2005] is two text pieces which function together to outline a story, with a subject, character, setting, and rising action.

She remembers her fourth grade teacher; her student number, which is included on these works. The text pieces stabilize the heterogeneity of the show. They suggest things outside of the computer that have a role in authoring the work. George Bush, Akron Ohio, and her Soviet refugee parents are not necessarily named in the works, she continued.



Liz Vitlin, "Synonyms #1.doc [February 24, 2005]", inkjet print, 2022. Photo courtesy of Prairie.

She then spread out a series of photos across the floor of her studio. The photos range in size, the largest 5"x7", although most were smaller than my palm. Two feature a stuffed bear, *Untitled.bmp [January 25, 2005]* and *untitled2.bmp [January 25, 2005]*. In each the bear is arranged slightly differently, as if camera stills. She pointed out how the photo works all seem vaguely familiar; but what is familiar I am not exactly sure. In the gallery a friend said to me: Looking at the bear, I am reminded of being a child, where 30 minutes was enough time to get lost in a narrative I wanted to play out.

For me, the photos are each marked by the spectral presence of the artist. In *DSC00023.JPG [May 18, 2003]* we see her bed made with a cordless phone placed on one side and a charging cable at the foot of the bed. These items are filled with meaning by unseen activities taking place within the bedroom. In *DSC02956.JPG [February 2, 2006]* we see outside her bedroom, toward neighboring houses. There is a foregrounded pine tree on the left of the picture space, where the viewer can see the artist's gaze is obfuscated by glass. As the gaze is looking slightly down at the neighboring houses, the image likely originates from a second story window. The artist permits us to look out from the artist's space.

The window reads to me a Woolf like symbol. Where the private mind of the maker becomes a medium for individual and collective memories to interact with the outside world. For example, *DSC02040.JPG [September 30, 2005]* reveals the computer itself, the only time in the show, to the viewer. The maker's hand, with her name written in black ink and adorned with hearts on her palm, is the subject of the image. It covers most of the computer screen, with two instant messenger windows open, one blotting out the other in near totality. It is possible to make out the affectionate exchange on the screen: "yes did you miss ME!!" "of course hunny i always miss you." While it is the luminosity of the open chat room behind the maker's hand that fills the image with uncanny excitability.

Familiarity and the spectral figure of the artist continues in three works displayed on 8" video monitors. She described them to me as video sculptures, as each is a single looped gesture. The monitors are small and low to the ground, and the moving images first appear blurry. *MOV01782.MPG [August 06, 2005]* is an 8 second video sculpture which comes across raucous—a character jumps, belly exposed—although the video is muted. This work articulates the maker's ability to move between medium and tool. As the artist turns the camera on herself, her body becomes a site of poetic performance mediated by her camera.



Liz Vitlin, Installation View. Photo courtesy of Prairie.

When Liz showed me three framed prints in her studio, each 20"x26", she said, there is a moment when the computer becomes more than practical. She was sure these were intentionally aesthetic objects; each created in Microsoft Word, collaging gradients, lines, and images. As I was looking at the print in the gallery aptly titled *Play.doc [April 6, 2003]*, Liz's father asked me what I saw. I thought at first a portrait of the computer itself, revered, like a friend. He asked if I saw myself in the works. Which I did, in the undetermined expressions I once experienced with my own computer. He laughed, and said: he could see through the objects in the show the eight year old who made them.

The title of the show indicates the work is serial. It will continue. How will the themes in this show evolve? (What will happen to the Chinchilla?) Curating and preserving her gestures, the body of work emerges a portrait of the artist's childhood computer as a tension of possibility. In *Doc2.doc [March 16, 2003]*, Liz explained, is her fourth grade teacher. Outside the gallery, Liz's friend remarked to me: that Liz made herself the desk for her teacher. The role of the artist is to place herself inside the apparatus; to reveal herself through the trajectories of the information she seeks and holds onto. It is brilliant. I agree.