

Art in the Hirsch Library

On View in the Online Resources Room

Matthew Sontheimer

American, born 1969

Inside Out

2002

Vinyl transfer and screen saver

Museum commission with funds provided by Bettie Cartwright and Colin Kennedy

2002.217

Matthew Sontheimer is fascinated by the distinction between line and language. Almost all of his recent work is based on an abstract alphabet he developed by dissecting his father's signature into its component parts. Using this alphabet, he encodes a short message of his own choosing which he renders as a drawing. The message is generally based on a private experience, story, or insight.

For *Inside Out* (which was commissioned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston for the Electronic Resource Room of the Hirsch Library), Sontheimer has revealed that the marks on the walls spell out the phrase "enter from a bound search to an open scroll." The drawing on the left wall is based on the words "enter from a bound," on the center "search," and on the right "to an open scroll."

Sontheimer first drew the text by hand on large sheets of paper. With technical assistance from graphic artist Pat Elston, he then had the drawing enlarged and cut in vinyl, applying it to the walls using a transfer process. Portions of the text are partially covered by a second layer of white vinyl, which mimics the effect of liquid paper on a page and suggests the revisions of thought that research engenders. Both the structure and content of *Inside Out* comment on the liberating effect of the computer on traditional forms of research—liberation from the physical (the world of books and journals) to the virtual (the world of computers and the Internet). The tension Sontheimer creates between drawing and writing gives the work its exceptional power.

The second component of *Inside Out* takes advantage of the electronic resources available in the library. The "letters" not whited-out from the left and right walls form an anagram for "screen door." From the words "screen door" Sontheimer created a virtual drawing and programmed it into a screensaver that appears on the library's monitors. As Sontheimer has noted, the defining characteristic of both a screen door and a computer screen is permeability. While each marks the boundary between inside and outside, they also facilitate communication between these different worlds.

The concept for Sontheimer's *Inside Out* installation evolved over a period of four months, as the artist invited feedback from the museum's curatorial, library, and design staff. Other prominent commissioned works at the MFAH include *Curtain*, the bronze sculpture by Joseph Havel that frames the entrance to the Audrey Jones Beck Building; Ellsworth Kelly's *Houston Triptych* and Linda Ridgway's *Dance*, placed in the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden; and *The Light Inside*, James Turrell's installation in the tunnel beneath Main Street that connects the MFAH's Audrey Jones Beck Building to the MFAH's Caroline Wiess Law Building.