

Bruce Burris
LINDSAY IS A COMMIE

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“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” some theorist of the ‘60s said one time. “John Lindsay is a Commie” is a story someone once wrote on a placard. Things said in protests, whether chanted or written on banners, are liable to get lost. Things said in magazines are likely to be questioned by an increasingly distrustful public. Things said by public health facilities with dwindling funds may not be carried out. The things we say about who we are and why we do the things we do are likely to be fantasies. We are inclined to forget the things people write on protest placards in defense of murder, war, and the president.

Bruce Burris’ work bears witness to the things people have said. It dramatizes the relationship between political struggle and tumult and the written word. The troubled reading of information is recast visually—drawn, a word is something other than written. These are statements of authority, cries scrawled on walls, overheard conversations. Repeating words brings their authority into question. Some serve as a reminder of forbidden spaces; others are protest signs. Others still appear to be overheard conversations. Cut up, the words acquire new significance, recast as a means of questioning them.

LINDSAY IS A COMMIE, comprising works composed between 2020 and 2023, spanning the period of 1970 to the present. Several works address the exceptionally turbulent month of May 1970, in which students were massacred by the National Guard at Kent State University and by police at Jackson State University, when the movement against the Vietnam War was at its peak. Following the killings at Kent State, a nationwide student strike was launched. In New York City, pro-Nixon construction workers attacked protesting students in the Hard Hat Riots. After showing support for the students, then-mayor of New York John Lindsay was labeled “red mayor,” “commie,” “rat,” “bum” by the pro-war counterparts.

As a teenager, Burris was politicized by magazines of the late 1960s. In his own words, he was “patching it all together”. He read the Saturday Evening Post, Look, and Time magazines at the local library, hidden from his family, learning that written words could be seized and set down against the grain of conservative Nixonite narratives. In his disjointed portraits, threats are scribbled in the figures’ hair, the snarky words of pro-war patriots transformed into an ode. Hippie hair is also there to be read—depending on your socio-political preferences, you regard either a comrade or an enemy. The accusation served to progressive mayor John Lindsay is set in hovering, psychedelic text. Cut apart from its original protest sign, the accusation becomes an elegy.

Burris’s work is a wild and iterated reading practice, a newspaper study of political struggle, examining what people say about what they do, who they are and who other people are in relation to them. The ways that political actors imagine themselves are ironized. Hippies are seen from the outside: in *Nurses Against Mandatory Vaccines and A Loggers Lament*, we read people’s autoconstruction at a distance from the signs they themselves have made. In telling the story of the eventual collusion of social services with carceral facilities, words become broken promises, un-carried out work. The reiterative signs make us wonder how many of these words connect with a lived reality, which actions were carried out, which were forgotten, and why? Burris draws these signs up to witness their enunciation, asking us to stop and read them again.

—Rona Lorimer