Summantic Equations: 84 = Carravaggio... 1979, collage, ink and pencil on paper, 17 3/4" x 24 3/4".  
Summantic Equations: 86 = Giotto = Vermeer... 1979, collage, ink and pencil on paper, 17 3/4" x 24 3/4".

All works in this exhibition have been loaned by the artist unless otherwise noted.

Selected one-woman exhibitions:  
O.K. Harris Works of Art, NYC '75, (first); Franklin Furnace Archive, NYC '76, '78; Bertha Urdang Gallery, NYC '76, '79; Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts, Roslyn, NY '77; Dany Keller Galerie, Munich '78; 112 Greene St. Workshop, NYC '78; The Emily H. Davis Art Gallery, University of Akron '78; Forum Stadtspark, Graz, Austria '78; Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago '79.

Selected group exhibitions:  
Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY Word, Image, Number '75; Centre for experimental art and communication, Kensington Arts Association, Toronto Language and Structure in North America '75; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago Words at Liberty '77; Drawings and Projects of the 70's, organized by Institute for Art and Urban Resources, travelled to Europe and Middle East '77-79; Artwords and Bookworks, Los Angeles, CA (travelled to Artist's Space, NYC, etc.) '78; The Ohio State University Gallery of Fine Art, Columbus Six Artists '78; Baxter Art Gallery, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena The Poetry of Systems '78; HERA, Women's Cooperative Gallery, Wakefield, RI Serial Drawing '78; New York Department of Transportation 10 Windows on 8th Ave. between 53rd and 54th Streets '79.

Selected bibliography by Shaw:  


Market Research, The Emily H. Davis Gallery, University of Akron '78.

Statement in Serial Drawings, HERA, Women's Cooperative Gallery (Wakefield, RI '78, unpaginated.

An Add, four page newsprint, New Urban Landscape Series, Institute for Art and Urban Resources (New York) '79.

Selected bibliography about Shaw:  

Frank, Peter. Additional Meanings, Bertha Urdang Gallery (New York) '76.

Seven years ago Karen Shaw came up with a deceptively simple idea: to explore the equivalencies between words and numbers based on a system in which $A=1$, $B=2$, $C=3$, ...$Z=26$. In Shaw's Summantic Alphabet, the word "CAR", for instance, would translate into the number 22 (that is, $3 + 1 + 18$). This system is loosely inspired by the Hebraic Gematria, the cabalistic tradition of searching for essential meanings through numeric interpretation of ancient texts.

Shaw has long been interested in code. She remembers being impressed as a young reader with the episode in Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace in which Pierre takes the number 666 (the number of the beast from the Apocalypse, ch. xiii, verse 16) and, using the Gematria, manipulates both the name "L'Empereur Napoleon" and his own name to equal that number.

Shaw's Summantic Alphabet, however, came directly out of her experiences as a computer coder for NBC. Participating in an "unbiased" study of the effects of television violence on children, Shaw was "amused and bemused, swayed and enraged" by the process in which every manner of human response could be manipulated and coded. Says Shaw, "Soon I was able to code the entire universe and converse with colleagues in two digit numbers. We could register attitudes and information with the utmost economy while completely eliminating feeling and personality."

Initially Shaw used her Summantic Alphabet to reduce several literary masterpieces to a single final total (e.g. the Gospel According to St. Matthew = 1,116,071). These time-consuming Summations as she called them were elaborate parodies on the apparent zeal with which society leaves personal identities impoverished through its growing reliance on numbers. Shaw's Summations also took a good-natured swipe at received art activity. Shaw's work blossomed when, in 1975, she reversed her working process. The new approach, in which found numbers were transcribed into words of the equivalent sum, was called Summantics (pun intended, to be sure). Using Summantics as a guide, the number 100 might equal "INTELLECTUAL" or "USELESS CULTURE" or "KAREN SHAW". Summantics opened up a world of possibilities for Shaw.

This MATRIX exhibition offers a sampling of the range of Shaw's Summantic explorations. Also on display is Shaw's essential and unfinished reference work, Summantic Vocabulary Collection: 1-278, a ledger in which Shaw has so far collected approximately 20,000 words. While Shaw's Summations literally and figuratively "bellittled" epic achievements from the past, her Summantic renderings are sunny and expansive affirmations of human creativity in the face of adverse trends. Summantics has enabled Shaw to translate the numerical flotsam which pollutes our daily lives (e.g. grocery receipts, bakery checks, theatre tickets) into multiple poetic meanings.

In Shaw's more recent Summantic Equations she humorously weaves art history with simple set theory. Context is important. These very beautiful collages draw amusing, revealing and unlikely correspondences between words and numbers, images and meaning. What happens when an artist chooses to limit herself to the use of a specific system? The human mind is flexible and inventive. Artforms as diverse as Georges Seurat and Sol LeWitt, John Cage and Hans Haacke have found systems to be an interesting and useful tool. As we can see, Shaw's simple code has enabled her to enhance our daily life with "additional meanings."

The intellectual clarity and simplicity of Shaw's approach is happily reflected in the art she makes. Stylistically her work is most often refined and chaste. At the same time, it grows increasingly rich in aesthetic, literary and socio-political implications. Perhaps the most original aspect of her work is the ease and grace with which she references back to ancient tradition in order to penetrate the turmoil of our modern age. Karen Shaw was born in New York City in 1941 and received a BFA from Hunter College in 1965. In 1978 she was awarded a Visual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She lives in Baldwin, New York, has a studio in Long Island City and is represented by the Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York City.

Andrea Miller-Keller Curator of MATRIX

Works in MATRIX:
Summantic Vocabulary Collection: 1-278, begun in 1974 and ongoing, ink and ledger book on wooden bookstand.

Additional Meanings: Forgiveness = 139, 1976, altered supermarket circular, pretype and plastic lettering, 22 x 14 x 3/4".

Additional Meanings 154: Finish line, 1976, magazine photograph and ink on ledger paper, 11 1/4 x 8 3/4".

Additional Meanings 236: Planet's bad dreams, 1976, photograph, crayon, pencil and plastic lettering on paper, 10 3/4 x 13 3/4".

Additional Meanings 327: Madness, wisdom, 1976, magazine photograph, ink and pencil on graph paper, 11 1/4 x 8 3/4".

Additional Meanings 340: Pools of a God, 1976, photographs, crayon and pencil on paper, 36" x 48".

Summantic Receipts 933: Fond art ornaments, 1976, cash register receipt and ink on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 3/4".

Additional Meanings 257: Pрагmatic leaders, 1977, magazine photograph, pencil and plastic lettering on paper, 26" x 20 1/4".

Additional Meanings 267: FLacid life, 1977, magazine photograph and pencil on graph paper, 11 1/4 x 8 3/4". Lent by the Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York City.

Summantic Receipts: Cicadas reach trees, 1977, cash register receipts and ink on graph paper, 8 3/4 x 11 1/4".

Summantic Tickets: Leas is More, 1977, tickets, ink and typescript on paper, 9 1/4 x 9 1/4". Lent by Stephan Shaw, Baldwin, New York.

Summantic Tickets No. 60: This is a simple sentence, 1977, Saratoga racetrack tickets, pencil and plastic lettering on graph paper, 20 1/4 x 16 1/2".

Additional Meanings: Back To School, 1978, altered supermarket circular, pretype and plastic lettering, 22 x 14 x 3/4".

Investigations into the Inequality of Translation: Rex et Regina Mortui Sum = 396, 1979, collage, pencil and plastic lettering on paper, 14 1/4 x 26 3/4".

Investigations into the Inequality of Translation: Je crois que vous avez tort = 362, 1979, collage, pencil and plastic lettering on ledger paper, 14 1/4 x 26 3/4".

Summantic Equations: 24 = X, 1979, collage, crayon, ink and pencil on paper, 17 3/4 x 24 3/4".

Summantic Equations: 32 = Parle, 1979, acrylic, ink and pencil on paper, 17 3/4 x 24 3/4".

Summantic Equations: 40 = Bleue, 1979, acrylic, ink and pencil on paper, 17 3/4 x 24 3/4".

Summantic Equations: 72 = Ingres = Orgasm, 1979, collage, ink and pencil on paper, 17 3/4 x 24 3/4".

Summantic Equations: 77 = Smiles, 1979, collage, crayon, ink and pencil on paper, 17 3/4 x 24 3/4". Lent by the Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York City.