

He sees in broken English

IN THE beginning was the word. But words are deceptive things.

If you walk this way and that, for instance, past the three parallel Plexiglas sheets of one of the seven large "Tidal Gestures" in the back room of the Ronald Feldman gallery, the fractured words and letters in black type on the Plexiglas will form different combinations and permutations until you might finally make out something rather like: "We return / from angle / to center / substance / changes."

The front room has 26 sheets of Plexiglas, one for each letter of the alphabet, suspended from contraptions that look like the coat racks that guys push through traffic in the Garment District. Each sheet displays a number of words starting with the given letter ("Absolute, Advance, After, Again, Air, All, Art, As, At") and a poem: "Looking through words / places form / fall slowly together / like evening / arriving shadowing / claims of the present . . ."

The artist calls these "Word: Nerves." He is also the man who wrote the poems. At the moment this tall, good-looking artist/poet was fiddling with the little lights behind the "U" screen and the "Y." Those oversized coatrack things had been specially constructed for this exhibit, he said.

What was he planning to do with them after the show?

"Make me an offer," said Edwin Schlossberg.

His interest in words, and in art, and in words-as-art, goes back a long way. Born here in 1945, son of Mae and textile manufacturer Alfred Schlossberg, he'd started writing poems at 15. "Then I saw a lot of Oriental scrolls, and it seemed to me the visual part of reading was mostly being ignored."

At 19, while majoring at Columbia University in English, American Lit, and physics, he did his "first small layered poems." In 1968 he put out a mixed-media book of "Words Words Words Words Words Words," Universal Limited Art Editions, preface by Robert Rauschenberg. It was shown at the Jewish Museum.

His Ph.D. thesis was on "Einstein and Beckett," itself published as a book in 1973. "When you're learning about somebody," Schlossberg says, "you have a conversation with them, and at that time I was learning about physics."

What did Samuel Beckett teach you about physics?

"A lot." Serious smile. "Science is always about setting domains. Beckett was brilliant at describing domains that were not normal."

In "Philosopher's Game," a book written with John Brockman in 1977, he went on to imagine conversations between such as Woody Allen and Erasmus.

The starting point for "Word: Nerve," those alphabetized Plexiglas panels, he said, had been the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary.

"If you read the Oxford English Dictionary all the way through, which I did —"

All the way through?

"Yeah."

How long did it take?

"Four months. If you read the OED all the way through, you find an amazing pattern of words with multiple meanings, the ones that take up eight or nine pages each. Other words only have three lines — not much activity around them, right?"

"I started thinking about that. And how all the multiple meanings came through expression

EYE ON ART

JERRY TALLMER



and inflection. Well, you can isolate this out, so the poetry comes through — as it always does — in the reader's mind."

And the writer's mind, yes?

"Oh yeah," said Edwin Schlossberg, poet. "Someone's gotta start 'Tidal Gestures' a whole different thing," he said. "It seemed interesting to try for the same idea through multiple visual levels. The title has to do with layers and

waves, and talking about something very big and very slight at the same time. When you look at the poems, they move sort of like waves and water."

In the other room, the "Word: Nerve" room, the last panel is "Z." On which panel the poem starts: "Who, looking deeply, becomes the eyes I behold . . ." Two of the eyes that Edwin Schlossberg frequently beholds are those of his wife, Caroline Kennedy. They met when she worked in a museum. He designs installations for museums too, particularly children's museums. "There are things I do with lots of people, and things I do by myself," said Ed Schlossberg.

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer St., (212) 226-8232, to June 8.



New York Post: Michael Schwab

WORDS WORD WORDS: Artist Edwin Schlossberg's work "Tidal Gestures" portrays words themselves as art.