

VIENNA

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Nina Canell, *Brief Syllable (Truncated)*, 2017, subterranean cable fragment, 9 × 25 5/8 × 9". From "Transmissions."

"Transmissions"

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Alex Bacon's curatorial premise for this concise and elegantly installed group show, part of the annual "curated by" initiative bringing international curators to Vienna galleries, was to examine how artists address "rates of transmission—of energy, information, goods, bodies," and the like. Questions of circulation, dissemination, and exchange have a significant Conceptualist lineage (think of Hans Haacke or Allan Sekula), but Bacon's engagement with these highly relevant issues of contemporary life displayed a rare sharpness. Perhaps counterintuitively, however, the exhibition's strength derived from the physical reality that underpins the abstract and invisible process of such transmissions. Materiality was the show's bass note, so to speak. The dumb thingness of the works on view was what made this exhibition a spatial situation worth spending time in, lending substance to its intellectual mission.

The sculptural presence of Nina Canell's *Brief Syllable (Truncated)*, 2017, most succinctly demonstrated this centrality of objecthood. Anchoring the whole show—quite literally, as it weighs some 180 pounds despite its modest size (nine by twenty-five and five-eighths by nine

inches)—it is a short segment of a subterranean cable that combines many functions, including data transmission. This sausage of a sculpture reminded us that the dematerialization digital technology purportedly offers is only a veneer with heavy infrastructure behind it. It was also a compelling object in its abject helplessness. In our society, nothing could feel more useless than a cable less than a yard long that cannot connect anything. Its very incapacity made it fascinating to look at.

Lewis Stein's *Untitled, flashing lights*, 1978, consists of two lightbulbs on a wall attached to a timer. They turn on and off alternately, each state lasting for two seconds. The constantly changing light, as well as the clicking of the analog timer, created a pulsing, slightly unnerving atmosphere in the gallery, compelling the viewer to be always conscious of the space, to accept the presence of a constant, albeit subtle, irritant. On inspection of the piece itself, rather than the light condition it produces, I noticed its decidedly vintage look. This effect was due to Stein's decision to use the same components—including the sockets, the (slightly imprecise) timer, and the wires—he used in 1978, replacing only the bulbs when they burn out. Such insistence on the uniqueness of the artifacts for a piece that appears to be so “Conceptual,” in the classical sense, not only situated it in a specific historical moment and material condition, but also demonstrated the artist's acute understanding of the importance of formal exactitude, even in a work so reduced to the essential.

Nathalie Provosty's *Triptych (x)*, 2019, which despite its title is a diptych, had an immediately noticeable exquisiteness. The painting's smooth surface consists of layers of yellow in many subtly different tonal variations, demarcating rectilinear and curving forms. When one looked closely, thin lines of other colors became apparent on the edges of each canvas, visually accentuating the softness of the work's warm hues. The role this diptych played was, on one level, to offer “alternatives to the oppressive conditions highlighted by the machinic physicality of the other works,” as Bacon explained in his text. However, deprived of their function, those other works were mute stuff, no longer performing, and yet they were nonetheless unique, and more nuanced in their object status than a painting that, by contrast, can *only* be art and therefore has a thinner history. From this point of view, the other works elevated the painting to the level of conceptual complexity inherent in appropriated artifacts. Taken together, the effect was that of a coherent ensemble that allowed each piece to develop multifaceted significations unlikely to have been foreseen by their authors.

— Yuki Higashino

