

TEXTE ZUR KUNST



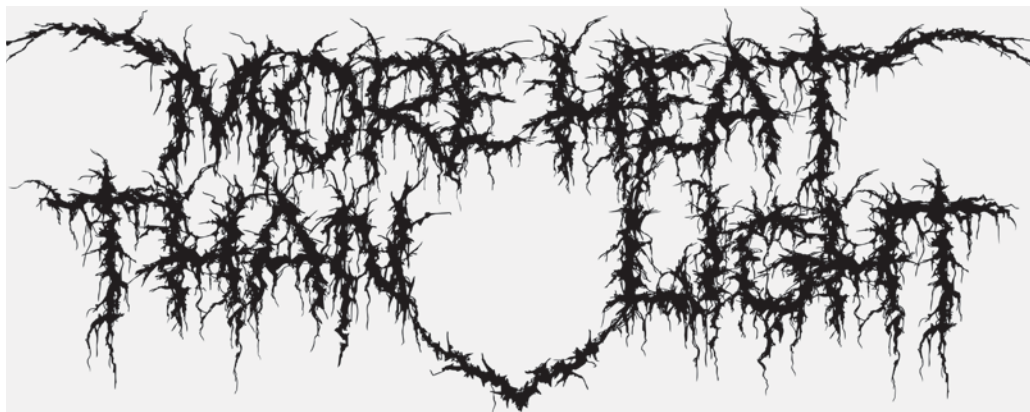
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THE CANON

WEAK LOCAL LINEAMENTS

On Sam Lewitt at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco



"Sam Lewitt: More Heat Than Light," 2015

In 2005, artists Gareth James, Sam Lewitt, and Cheyney Thompson set out to make a twelve-issue magazine questioning drawing's place in theory and practice. The issues, which would be based on the series of lectures held on New York's Lower East Side over the course of one year, would be released all at once, thus challenging the supply and demand cycles expected of artists (and the media) and which were thought requisite for maintaining currency in the public eye.

This fall, Lewitt mounted a solo show at San Francisco's CCA Wattis center, feeding the entirety of the gallery's energy supply directly into his sculptural work, rewiring the institution's conditions of circulation and display. With full awareness of how this mid-00s discourse might relate, James, here, offers his thoughts on the valances of Lewitt's production.

In the first of three planned iterations, Sam Lewitt's solo exhibition "More Heat Than Light" was on view at the CCA Wattis Institute this fall. A second staging (with the same objects and under the same title) will briefly take place in an Airbnb apartment in New York before traveling on to the Kunsthalle Basel in April 2016. As those familiar

with Lewitt's ongoing interrogation of visual, material, and financial economies might expect, his exhibition draws into its purview a number of compelling aesthetic and political issues. Wattis curator Anthony Huberman neatly laid out the discursive entanglements of the exhibition in a text available at wattis.org, so the following remarks will focus on the two initially simple gestures that organized the show.

The first, precipitating gesture consisted of a redirection of the total available electrical energy supplied to the Wattis' ceiling lighting tracks. Ten track heads were installed but rather than supply electricity to lights (there were none), the heads were rewired to long cable extensions that hung down throughout the space, dispensing their current into large copper-clad flexible heating circuits that lay directly on the concrete floor of the gallery. Flexible micro-heating circuits are a ubiquitous and essential component of a wide variety of digital technology (think of everything from medical equipment to military targeting systems to smartphones), that requires the constant

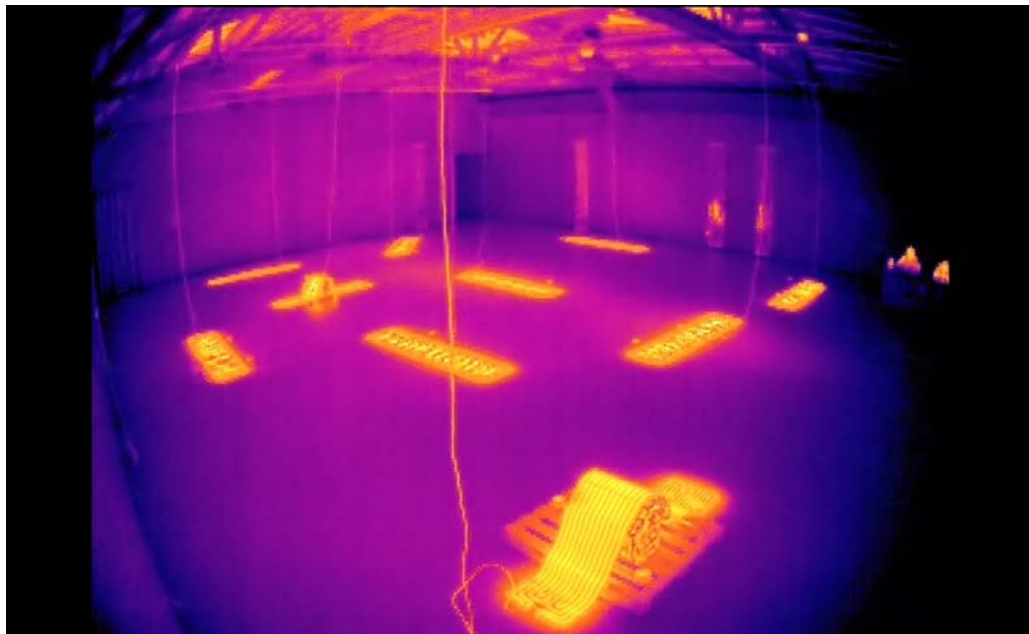
regulation of internal temperature for precise and reliable operation. Lewitt's comparatively enormous, custom-fabricated circuits were almost grotesque in scale; combined with their redirection of the gallery's energetic resources away from the *showing* of the show to the *heating* of it, the observation that the exhibition space is itself a highly regulated computational apparatus became unavoidable.

At the opening event on a warm evening in San Francisco, as the available natural light and the outdoor evening temperature fell, the increasingly hot and dark interior of the gallery enforced a similar change of description on the exhibition's visitors too: transformed from spectators (defined by their capacity for looking) to, in a sense, autonomic computational bodies (redescribed as galvanic sensors). As dusk fell over the conventionally vibrant visual field of the gallery, a relatively uncommon degree of physical caution was required to avoid stepping on the sculptures on the floor. The digital sensors taking their temperature – ranging from 130°F (54°C) to 190°F (88°C) as the heating circuits struggled to maintain the entire gallery as one corresponding to the description “160°F” (71°C) – provided the only distinct visual evidence of their location. Meanwhile slightly sweaty faces and underarms registered the moist thickening of the epidermal encounter between the skin and the too-warm air.

There are gestures in art into which the possibility of critical discourse disappears like a black hole (joke paintings for example) leaving in their place a kind of affective afterlife or cosmic shudder. But there are also gestures, concerning mundane technical details of apparently limited interest, that prove capable of unfolding in such a way that they envelop questions of a far greater

magnitude. This capacity of a gesture to be unfolded fascinated Walter Benjamin, a key intellectual touchstone for Lewitt, and to adequately situate the latter's gesture we would need to turn to work with clear formal as well as calefactory relationships with Lewitt's show: Michael Asher's “Kunsthalle Bern, 1992” (1992), in which Asher aggregated all the institution's radiators along a single wall); and Art & Language's “The Temperature Show” (1966), a series of photographs using infrared film to reveal heated infrastructure below the surface of the apparently natural landscape. The trouble with good examples, of course, is that they obscure and mislead like bad ones: the composition of their relative intellectual and artistic conditions, their medium of intelligibility, are, in fact, significantly different.

In the 1980s, Art & Language leant heavily on Wittgenstein's argument that description was the only activity proper to philosophy (explanation being the preserve of the natural sciences). Description, for Art & Language, was thus a key activity for establishing a critique of interpretative method and for intervening in the discourses that receive and recursively condition artistic work. Today, this type of argument is more likely to evoke Latour, and his transformation of Wittgenstein's philosophical stricture into a normative prescription for knowledge production in *general*, leaving the task of explanation to the spontaneous aggregating activity of networks. Such arguments evidently serve free market advocates embarrassed by the implausibility of their explanations (description will suffice!) more than they serve Lewitt's critical purposes. Perhaps Lewitt's recurrent titling motif “Weak Local Lineaments” evoked the fading of explanatory power into mere description, but additional language occasionally



"Sam Lewitt: More Heat Than Light," CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 2015, installation view

included in subtitles and insinuated obscurely into the wall pieces (such as "Belong Anywhere" or "Get Connected") evoked the related logic of the order-word. The move from an initial statement to a parenthetical or imbedded second statement reminds us that descriptive statements do not merely circulate as innocent re-presentations of their subjects, but perform operations according to the value judgments of the systems in which they are imbedded.

The second regulatory gesture concerns the limitations placed on the circulation of images of the exhibition beyond the exhibition space itself. While by convention galleries quickly photograph exhibitions (in order to capitalize their contents in as many and as far-flung locations as possible), the primary images broadcast beyond the physical confines of this exhibition were those made by a thermal camera located in one corner of the gallery, live-streamed via the Wattis' website. The thermal camera does not produce "photographic" images since it bypasses the visual spectrum of light altogether, registering radiation

exclusively. Thus what passes for a photographic representation is in fact no such thing. Rather, it is a re-presentation of relations of temperature difference as spatial relations, in a symbolically organized description: white heat cools to yellow, orange, red, cools further into blues and violets, all mapped over a standard perspectival description of space.

In "The Art of Describing," Svetlana Alpers's project was to correct the false imposition of the hegemonic models of art history (those developed to explain the symbolic, iconographic, and narrative logic of Italian art) upon the conspicuously optical mode of knowing and representing the world in the emergent Dutch landscape and still life traditions of the seventeenth century. Applying Alpers's argument might seem nonsensical at first, given that Lewitt's exhibition represents something like the dusk of the optical image. Yet its relevance derives from the fact that Alpers does not champion one tradition of pictorial analysis over another, but describes the historical emergence of their conflict: a point that turns not



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just on information optically recoverable from the artworks themselves, but equally on the substantive shift in the market form of distribution, exchange, and consumption for Dutch art. Alpers elaborated on the claim that Dutch art "adds actual viewing experience to the artificial perspective system of the Italians" by clarifying that the viewing experience was not one grounded in nature but a highly technologically mediated one. Lewitt's regulation of conventional documentation is attenuated by the two photographic details he selected for active circulation (that effectively function like re-descriptions of the thermal images of the exhibition), and the exhibition title itself is rendered in a conspicuously ornate font designed for the show; meanwhile, the .mov file playing on the website is also less a documentation of an artwork than an operational image in Farocki's sense, an image that goes to work rather than shows a work.

In a lecture on Hanne Darboven, Lewitt observed that the difficulties Darboven's work presents to the task of description are not inci-

dental but immanent to the construction (or impossibility) of a point of view. Lewitt described the experience of attempting to subjectively enter Darboven's "Kulturgeschichte: 1880–1983" as producing "the distinct feeling of what I can only call defensive fatigue. The sort of strange psychic enervation that is pleated with both excitement and anxiety, an anticipatory resistance that I can relate perhaps to a primitive reflex for self-preservation. This usually occurs in front of phenomena that I know are simply too interesting to deal with." I would argue that Lewitt shows what happens in art when the seeing/knowing amalgam of Dutch art is utterly imbricated in its insensible economic conditions of possibility rather than floated on it (and Nathan Brown, who presented an early version of his Mute article "The Distribution of the Insensible" at a conference organized by Lewitt, offers a compelling structure for this analysis). I would only add that if ekphrasis should be understood as the activity that not only attempts to exhaust its object in a mimetic doubling, but makes the activity of description itself seen in what it shows, then Lewitt's project can be understood as a return to the full complexity of a rigorous, non-positivistic descriptive activity, in conditions so utterly heated by the insensible, that fatigue and interest have become virtually indissociable.

GARETH JAMES

"Sam Lewitt: More Heat Than Light," CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, September 10–November 21, 2015.

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