

# San Francisco Chronicle



**New York-based artist Sam Lewitt describes his new site-specific installation at CCA, “More Heat than Light,” as something that might look like “radiators that have been collapsed onto a two-dimensional graphic.”**

At least, that’s what viewers could initially perceive upon entering the gallery at the California College of the Arts Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts. It is difficult, Lewitt concedes, to describe the work: It engages 10 specially designed, flexible heating circuits manufactured from a very thin circuit material (less than 7 mil), each attached to the gallery’s existing track lighting via extension cords. The heating circuits are highly sensitive and react in direct correlation to the nuances of their surrounding environment and the architecture of the space. Highly conceptual, the installation directly engages in systems of production, information and fabrication, or, as Lewitt describes them, “invisible systems.”

The challenge, however, isn’t in describing what can be seen, but rather in understanding what is being revealed.

Although much of Lewitt’s work employs technological apparatus—circuitry, magnets and, for his installation in the 2012 Whitney Biennial, ferrofluid—he describes himself as mostly an autodidact, with no formal scientific background. Born and raised in Los Angeles, he spent some time in art school in Boston before heading to New York to work a number of odd jobs, including freelance copyeditor and B-roll cameraman for a series of unmemorable documentaries.

His work, Lewitt says, has always on some level been about the technology of consumption. “I’m not interested in technology for its own sake,” he asserts. “I use it... but I’m highly skeptical about its promises of infinite stability.” It is a particularly ripe moment to debut this work in San Francisco, where the promises of technology and its impact are in constant dialog.

“More Heat Than Light” will be a spare visual experience, with ambient light coming entirely from skylights and windows. The heaters that Lewitt uses in his installation were created to provide thermal stability in communication devices such as diagnostic field equipment, chemical vats or satellite arms; he describes their implementation in his work as “a very eccentric use of technology.” The installation will consume the same amount of energy that the lighting fixtures would normally use, outputting heat instead of light and converting the institution’s usual energy consumption into sensory experience. As a result of the heating, the room will be warm. Small sensors will provide a live, constantly changing read of the output; as the flexible heating circuits are highly sensitive, the sensors will shift in response to almost imperceptible changes in the atmosphere, such as a gust of air from an open door or a shadow in the room.

Lewitt has worked with renowned San Francisco engineering designer Scott Minneman to finesse the electrical components of the work, which travels to Kunsthalle Basel next year; it has been designed to perform with both American and European voltages in order to consider global energy consumption more expansively. He also plans at some point to present it in New York, in an Airbnb, as a comment on energy consumption and the city. The accommodation, he says, will be selected based on the Airbnb’s catch phrase “Belong Anywhere” and the symbolic efficacy it promises.

Perhaps most compelling, and least visible, will be the thermal cameras installed in all of the exhibition spaces, providing a continuous live online feed of movement and activity in the gallery. Visitors will be reduced to their energy outputs, visible as moving metabolic organisms; the heaters, set around 130 degrees F, will motionlessly emanate heat to varying degrees. The resulting images will be observed only at a remove and will be fleeting.

“Outputting energy as wasted heat—if you think about what entropy is, and the irreversible loss of heat, it’s highly mortal,” says Lewitt. “This work may look different than a lot of my other work, but I see it as the logical conclusion of my interest in the guts of information culture.”

Sept. 10-Nov. 21

The Wattis Institute, CCA, San Francisco

360 Kansas St.

[wattis.org](http://wattis.org)