

# ARTFORUM

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## “A Very, Very Long Cat”

WALLSPACE

Samuel Morse's technology might be a relic, but the etymological basis of telegraphy still obtains (from the Greek, it literally means “writing from afar”). Indeed, if anything, one can—as “A Very, Very Long Cat” did—argue that, specific hardware of dots and dashes aside, ideas of transfer are now omnipresent, shaped by e-mail, social networks, and other technological and cultural shifts. Speaking of the proliferation of radio in his own time, Albert Einstein described communication devoid of physical support: “You see, wire telegraph is a kind of a

very, very long cat. You pull his tail in New York and his head is meowing in Los Angeles. Do you understand this? And radio operates exactly the same way: You send signals here, they receive them there. The only difference is that there is no cat.” Taking this quip as the basis for the show's title, Wall-space's Jane Hait brought together artists living in Berlin, London, and Los Angeles whose work involves transmission: the conveyance of thought, the diffusion of broadcast, or the exigencies of transport as registered through the actual movement of objects.

This last position was exemplified by Walead Beshty's FedEx works, which document transit directly. Having fabricated copper—or, elsewhere, glass—boxes in the proprietary FedEx dimensions, Beshty ships them via the



Dan Rees, *Payne's Grey and Vermillion*, 2010, acrylic on canvas and wall, two pieces, each 56 x 40". From "A Very, Very Long Cat."

same delivery service, with the objects bearing witness to their peregrination with fingerprints, affixed labels, and other abuses suffered in the process of their distribution. Differently if no less actually indexical, Dan Rees's Rorschach-like *Payne's Grey and Vermillion*, 2010, comprises a site-specific acrylic monoprint: A painted canvas with two hovering paint fields forms the stamp for a mirror image impressed on the adjacent wall, thus truncating—and making visually evident (as do Beshty's bar-code stickers and smudges)—the causal chain that produced it. If Rees thus produces a somewhat shorter cat, as it were, he also indicates the show's presentational dimension. For *Autobiography (If These Walls Could Speak)*, 2010, Nina Beier and Marie Lund directed gallery staff to excavate, according to memory, spackled holes left behind from artworks hung in prior installations, producing another kind of reflexivity about the space and its immediate history. The show's centerpiece, meanwhile, John Smith's film *Shepherd's Delight—An Analysis of Humour*, 1980–84—a half-hour romp that queries the origins and meanings of the saying “Red sky at morning, shepherds take warning; red sky at night, shepherds' delight” through an episodic series of eccentric and at times ridiculous analyses—trades on the slippages in meaning inherent in the reading of texts, product packaging, and other visual phenomena. (Its use of the illustrated lecture, as curator Jon Thompson first put forward, likewise pokes fun at semiological analysis.)

This interest in diffusion per se underpins much of the show. Smith's film, in particular, takes the *jesting absurdity of failed communication* as both its subject and its operational mode, but more works bespeak the pathos a game of telephone also implies, proposing an equally fundamental idea of the conveyance of information as innately entropic. Indeed, Kerry Tribe's affecting letterpress prints turn out to

have been, unsurprisingly, a “driving force in the organization of this show,” as the press materials make known (the associated film work, *H. M.*, 2009, is included in this year's Whitney Biennial). Henry Gustav Molaison (aka Patient H. M.) was an epileptic who underwent experimental brain surgery in 1953—only to lose the ability to form new long-term memories. His ensuing amnesia formed the basis for our subsequent understanding of neural structures, even as he convalesced for many decades in relative obscurity, completing, among other salutary pursuits, the crossword puzzles that Tribe formalizes in the exhibited prints. Here, the mnemonic is wished for and preemptorily stalled, even as Tribe, and “A Very, Very Long Cat” more generally, suggests that there can be no communication without a medium, however disembodied, let alone without a recipient.

—Suzanne Hudson