“A Very, Very Long Cat”

WALLSPACE

Samuel Morse’s telegraphy might be a relic, but the etymological basis of telegraphy still obtains (from the Greek, literally means “writing from afar”). Indeed, if anything, one could argue that a very, very long cat did—argue that, specific to the domain 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 its tail in New York and his head is moving 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, Wallspace’s Jane Hart 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 Walter Beatty’s FedEx works, which document transit directly: Having fabricated copper—or, elsewhere, glass—boxes in the proprietary FedEx dimensions, Beatty ships them via the same delivery service, with the objects bearing witness to their peripatetic 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 hoveringossa fields forms the stamp for a mirror image impressed on the adjacent wall, thus truncating—and making visually evident (as do Beatty’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 Humor, 1980–84—a half-hour romp that questions the origins and meanings of the saying “Bad sky at morning, shepherds take warning, red sky at night, shepherds’ delight” through an episodic series of eccentric and sometimes ridiculous analyses—trades on the slippages in meaning inherent in the wording of terra, product packaging, and other visual phenomena. (Its use of the illustrated lecture, in curator Jon Thompson’s spurious note forward, likewise pokes fun at semiotic analysis.)

This interest in diffusion per se underpins much of the show. Smith’s film, in particular, takes the ironic 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 lenticular 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 continued for many decades in relative obscurity, completing, among other salutary pursuits, the crossword puzzles that Tribe formulates in the exhibited prints. Here, the mnemonic is withheld for and perpetually 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