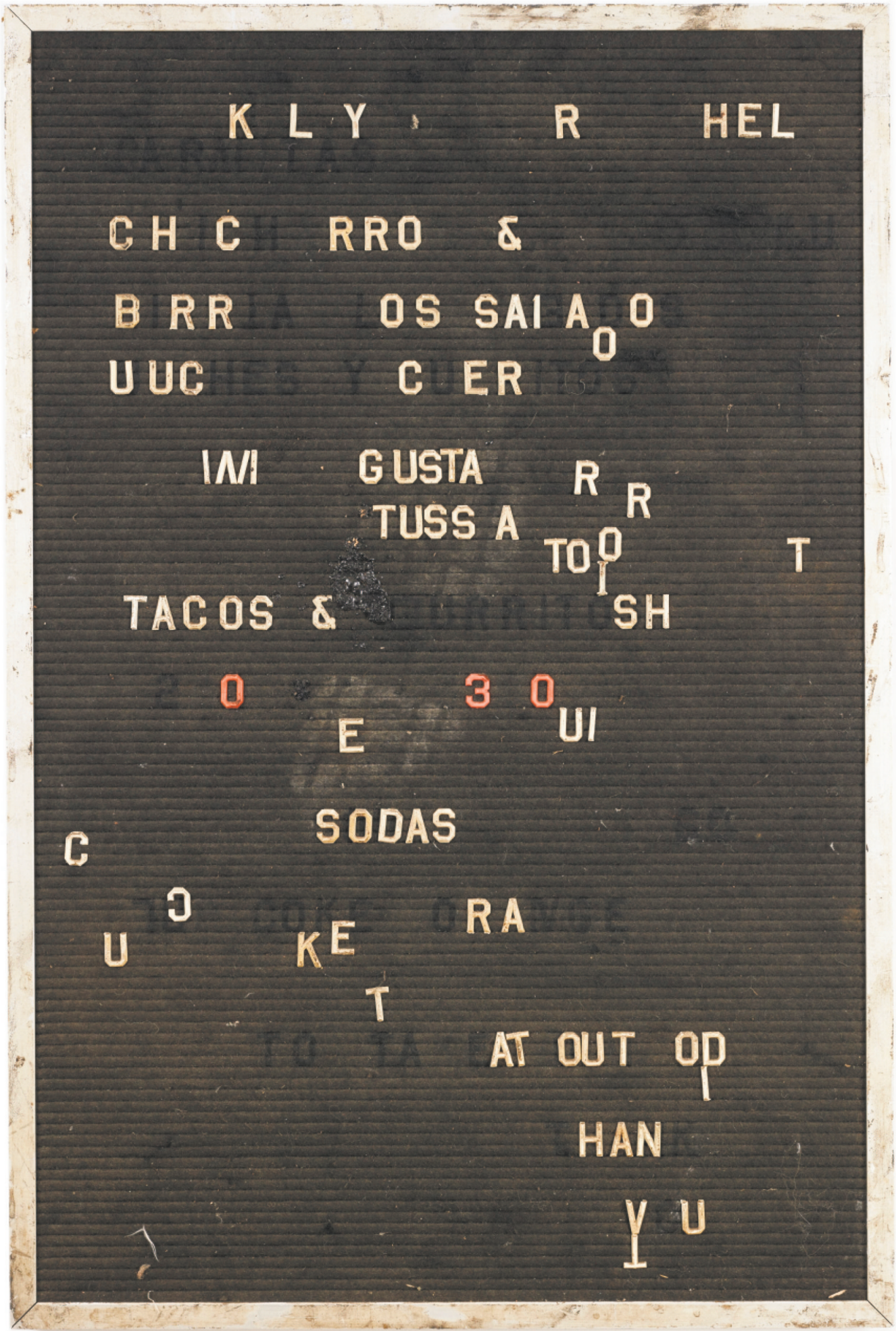




Johnna Arnold

Deconstructed works

‘Mechanisms’ challenges viewers to contemplate how objects relate to the surroundings

By Charles Desmarais

Whatever your first introduction to the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, you might be forgiven for quickly throwing up your hands in frustration. Type www.wattis.org, the published Internet address, into a browser and all you will see is a shortened version of the name, a screen full of flickering punctuation marks, and a few tiny navigation links at lower left. Walk into the current exhibition, “Mechanisms,” on view through Feb. 24, and you will be confronted with galvanized metal duct work that might make you think the gallery is under construction.

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Mechanisms: Noon-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through Feb. 24. Free. CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 360 Kansas St., S.F. (415) 355-9670. www.wattis.org

“Menu” by Lutz Bacher is a babble of poetry.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Exhibition collection challenges

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Without a hint from the handout checklist, you might miss the second work in the show, a website address in vinyl lettering on a window to the street. Or the third, an electrical outlet pulled from the wall and hanging by its wires.

That handout itself is a challenge: Every occurrence of the letter “e” is missing its bottom half.

I have been critical of the sometimes deliberately obtuse, oftentimes stingy Wattis style of presentation and explication of works of art. In this exhibition, though, the method serves a purpose.

“Mechanisms” is not about things mechanical, and there are no works of the sort we once called “kinetic art.” Instead, it asks the viewer to consider the psychoactive workings of physically static objects.

The metal ducts in your way as you entered, as you will have guessed, is a sculpture. Titled, in English, “Series D Square Tubes,” the work was made by the late Charlotte Posenenske in 1967. Off-the-shelf elements (or so they appear to me), originally manufactured to handle heating, ventilation and air conditioning, now conduct metaphorical ideas: about value and labor, about what we see and what is hidden from us. The gutted electrical outlet, a 2014 piece called “Constituent” by Cameron Rowland, works in much the same way.

The address lettered on the window, “https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marta_Russell,” a work by Park McArthur, takes us to a biographical entry on an activist for disability rights. McArthur directs us there in an implicit challenge to our

notion of the mechanics of work, and of what it means to be able.

Even the altered typeface of the exhibition brochure, as exasperating as it may be to read, is a conceptual work called “The Letter ‘E’” by Garry Neill Kennedy that prompts us to consider the workings of language, word by word.

Deeper into this large show, which includes from one to many works by 20 artists, the notion of “mechanism” expands, stretching the boundaries laid out at the start. Lutz Bacher’s “Cyclops (27 March 2017)” is a glitzy array of 27 of those mirrored domes that hide surveillance cameras in discount-store ceilings and other public places. As we move across the long wall where they incongruously hang in sparkling constellation, we are conscious of our multiple

The final piece in the exhibition is a 12-screen, 2¼-hour video installation by Harun Farocki ensconced in its own room.

reflections, which mask the intended one-way function of these objects. They are not for us to see; their purpose is to look at us.

Jean-Luc Moulène’s “Blown Knot 6 32” (the full title is far longer) is a sculpture that ingeniously interlinks glass forms. Clear in substance, densely complex in construction, the work’s mechanics are both easily read and impossible to unravel.

Louise Lawler is well known for her photographs of works of art in one setting, that are said to effectively be transformed by their placement in a new context. As if that mind-bender

were not enough, new work like “Formica (adjusted to fit, distorted for the time, slippery slope 1),” included here, is printed to conform to the size and shape of the wall where it is hung. The image, unmoored from its connection to a certain place in the perceived world, becomes more a part of its new environment than of its origin.

The final piece in the exhibition is a 12-screen, 2¼-hour video installation by Harun Farocki, ensconced in its own room. “Deep Play” (2007) analyzes, in minute detail, various aspects of a soccer game (the 2006 World Cup Final between France and Italy). There are screens to show the movements of players on the field, and graphics that indicate the direction of the ball, and measurements of speed, time and statistics most of us will not understand. Even the game plan of TV producers and the wanderings of security personnel are charted onscreen.

In the end, of course, there is not a single character in all the work’s complexity who comprehends the mechanism even of an isolated decision, action or error. “Deep Play,” full of in-

formation considered vital in some quarters, is, after all, about the ultimate futility of mapping meaning.

On that level, it is a wryly funny exercise in hubris, and a key to the entire exhibition. For “Mechanisms” is anchored by a humor that is so inextricable, so solidly amalgamated — so serious — that we might, at first, not trust our response to it.

Those Posenenske sculptures at the show’s beginning are a screwed-together potshot, surely, at the macho and self-serious art of the era — the black welded-steel forms of Tony Smith, in particular. A second work by Bacher, “Menu” (2002), is a Spanglish babble of concrete, vulgar, probably found poetry that is a joy to read aloud.

A roomful of rusted animal traps (“Twenty-two Traps,” 2012), selected and presented by Danh Vo, is a visual pun with numerous associations: A mind like a (weathered) steel trap. The perilous course we navigate through life. The trap we fall into when we think we know the meaning of art.

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Charlotte Posenenske’s “Series D Square Tubes” greets visitors to the exhibition “Mechanisms” at the Wattis Institute, which asks them to consider the psychoactive workings of physically static objects.

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