

Carl Burmeister: GODANDNOTHING.

MorYork Gallery, Highland Park, CA

NATALIE HADDAD AND JOHN WELCHMAN

Carl Burmeister's provocative solo exhibition *GODANDNOTHING.* addresses itself quite directly to the functionality of painting, understood as an inquiry into the possibilities of the signifying ends of pictorial mark-making. The show features five sculptural pieces made with conceptually seductive DIY electronics and steel elements entitled *Functional Painting Scanner* [original prototype] (2007), the titular work *GODANDNOTHING.* (2008), *THEMACHINEISTHEMEDIUM.* (2008), *THISISTRUE.THATISFALSE.* (2008), and *Brain Scanner* (2008). Also on view are two untitled pieces from 2008, one a strip-painting, the other configured in swathes of irregular, corrugated cardboard marked with handmade electronic circuits and what emerge as his signature horizontal spectra.

In fact, there isn't much painting per se in Burmeister's pieces, but what's there is crucial to his project. In each of the sculptural pieces, a scanner reads a strip of paint marks that alternate between light, dark, and a medium shade, each of which is scanned, then registered as a letter in a word or phrase on an accompanying digital display, and in four of the pieces, becomes the governing title. In the prototype, *Functional Painting Scanner*, the painting wraps around a

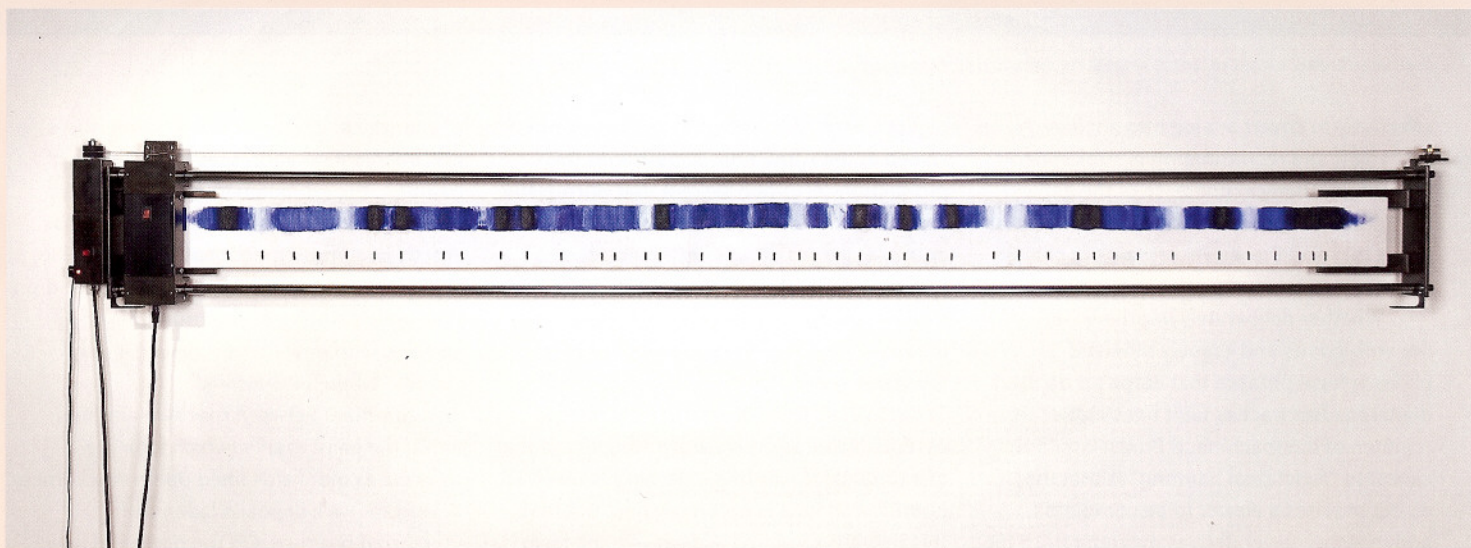
cylindrical frame that looks like a reconstituted zoopraxiscope linked by wires to a homemade computer system enclosed in a rusted metal box, with three spindly legs propping it up. Subsequent works are more stylized. In both "*GODANDNOTHING.* and *THISISTRUE.THATISFALSE.*, long strips of canvas are framed by sleek chrome scanners and wall-mounted.

As Burmeister puts it, "*The Functional Painting Scanner* is my 'solution' to the theoretical problem of how to make a painting functional. ...Simply putting light and dark marks on canvas and claiming that the marks are 'data' without a machine to read the marks seems insufficient." Clearly one of the most important scenes within which the use value of a painting might be staged is caught up in its legibility, in the work of reading and decoding that post-dates the production process. Burmeister proposes here that a painting's functionality lies in its capacity to perform its own interpretation through an act that encompasses its self-production, and in which each part of the piece contributes to its wider operation. One of the interesting aspects of this work is that it somehow steers a course past the hermeneutic traps set for it by the majority assumptions of the contemporary art world. So while there is a hint of pathos—and a larger dose of the bathetic in the space between God and Nothing—the Burmeister effect is more mannered than sentimental,

and more electronically actionist than it is parodic, allegorical or gadget-y.

The recalibration of the concept of functional painting in train here has side-stepped the slender legacies of the twentieth century—the move from laboratory formalism to Productivist design in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, or the Duchamp of Thierry de Duve who used paint as a ready-made. Burmeister works from the presumption that ordinary paintings—those familiar, framed rectangles of canvas covered with oil or acrylic—have, in general, suppressed the functions through which they were constructed; they exist to be viewed, passively, and are thus stripped of any purposeful utility. But Burmeister is not interested in discarding or superseding traditional painting. If anything, his interrogation of function routes him through one of the oldest questions about art: what constitutes a "painting"?

Burmeister's pieces are so reserved and efficiently programmed that they ease the viewer into a sense of complacent domination over the technological reaches of the machine. As a result, one of the primal fantasies to haunt modern technology—that human creation will eventually exact its revenge—is virtually absent here. All this is engendered by Burmeister's invention of "a three-state code" (as opposed to binary, for example), which allows him to think between dualistic and multi-state digital logics, and



CARL BURMEISTER, *GODANDNOTHING.* 2008, STEEL, ELECTRONICS, AND OIL ON CANVAS.



CARL BURMEISTER, UNTITLED, 2008. ACRYLIC ON CORRUGATED CARDBOARD.

effectively to covert analog into analogy. All that angst and recrimination is sublimated into the mechanical politesse of the gallery/workplace environment: the machine does as it was told and the viewer remains in charge of accommodating its emanations.

Whether deliberately or otherwise, the ambiguous and vaguely nihilistic philosophical phrases that come up on the digital readouts act as fault lines in the larger regimen of the machine. If Burmeister's caveat to "functional painting" is that the object requires a viewer to be completed, and that the viewer derives meaning from the

object's work, the ambiguity of the statements issued at the same time undermines the production-reception system that Burmeister sets up. In *THISISTRUE.THATISFALSE*, for example, the machine's statement denies function in any utilitarian sense because it lacks specific directives for the viewer to follow—"meaning" here is a *mise en abîme*. From one point of view, the operation of *THISISTRUE.THATISFALSE* terminates in essentially the same mist of ambiguity as that of a traditional painting—nothing is resolved, nothing concrete is accomplished. But here this result is rendered explicit—in the form

of a quizzical interrogation. If Burmeister's first intervention addresses the function of painting, the exhibition immediately poses a supplementary question directed at what exactly becomes "functional," and how. He has, in other words, activated the proposition that while painting or sculpture might perform with or without a viewer, it only "works" when it is received.

Stranded between machine and the spirit, the paint marks (which look like miniature color fields lined up on stockbroker ticker-tape) are deposits laden with contrarian promise. On the one hand they

offer themselves as a score of art-inflected, post-Minimalist marks, as in the tradition of Morris Louis's 1-81 and associated vertical stripe pieces from 1961. On the other, they are hand-worked approximations of pure information, ciphers whose materiality is finally eliminated by their coded eventuation. As opposed to the utilitarianism reached for by the Productivists in the USSR in the 1920s, in which the aesthetic was to be erased by the use value of designed objects, Burmeister's achievement here is to keep the art and informatic quotients of his work in arrested equilibrium, so that mark and letter (or number), material and code, apparatus and object, production and reception sound out a complex dialectic in which two sides of "use" are recalibrated as thesis and synthesis.

Borrowing, perhaps, from art's remorseless metaphorical capacities, he produces a middle position between, on the one hand, the on and off declensions of the exhibition, between a destiny caught up in the apparatus and emissions of data storage technology, and on the other hand, that parallel future (and Postmodern holy grail) of a properly conceptual painting.

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John C. Welchman is Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism in the Visual Arts department at UCSD. His most recent books are *The Aesthetics of Risk* (ed.) (2008), *Tony Oursler: Works 1997-2007* (2008), and *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art* (ed.) (2009), all with JRP|Ringier. His essay "Art Subjects: Physiognomy Without a Face" will appear in the catalog for the John Baldessari retrospective at Tate, London and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art later this year.

Artist's Project

Fax Drawings #5, 6, 7, 8

*X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly
Artist Project, Summer 2009*

KIM SCHOENSTADT

The ongoing *Fax Drawings* series started when I asked a gallery to fax me floor plans to prepare for an installation. I accidentally mis-loaded recycled Xeroxes of my drawings in my fax machine, and the result was a combination of the drawings with the floor plans. Normally, I translate the new drawings into large-scale wall pieces exhibited in the space that the floor plans depict. For the *X-TRA* artist's project, I utilized four pages of in-progress design layouts faxed to me by the editors.

Kim Schoenstadt was born in Chicago, IL. She lives and works in Venice, CA. Her solo and two-person exhibitions and projects have been featured at: Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands; Susan Inglet Gallery, New York; Lemon Sky: Projects and Editions, Los Angeles; Second Room Gallery, Brussels; and Toomey Tourell Gallery, San Francisco. Group exhibitions include: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Sprueth/Magers Gallery, Munich; Prague Biennale; Poland Biennale; Virginia Commonwealth University Anderson Gallery, Richmond; International Print Center, New York; Nüans, Duesseldorf; and Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. Current and upcoming projects include a collaborative project with Mara Lonner at the Los Angeles International Airport and an upcoming, two-part collaborative project with Rita McBride at Alexander and Bonin, New York, and the Santa Monica Museum of Art.