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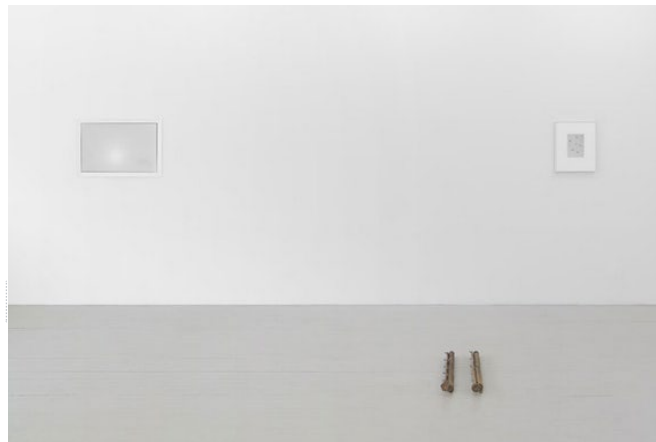


## ArtSeen

## Overture

A.K. Burns, Jason Hirata, Zoe Leonard, K.R.M. Mooney, Ulrike Müller, Carissa Rodriguez, Alan Ruiz

by Joseph Lubitz



Installation view: *Overture*, Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, 2019. Courtesy Callicoon Fine Arts. Photo: Jackie Furtado.

As a supplement to the feminist adage “the personal is political,” the group exhibition *Overture* asserts the formal is necessarily political, too. The press release for the exhibition, printed on US letter-sized paper, does not describe the exhibition, but rather details the standardization of the sheet format by Federal Paperwork Reduction Act, passed during the Reagan Administration, in 1981. The press release, actually a work by Alan Ruiz titled *WS-ANSI A* (2019), captions its own form, offering itself as evidence of a naturalized set of rules that manufacture a material consensus—what the text calls “radical formalism.” Comprising 500 inkjet prints of his text set in a black vinyl tray, *WS-ANSI A* lays out an ethos and method expressed throughout the exhibition, in which works by seven artists variously “privilege[s] the ground as much as the figure, the field as inextricable from the object.”

A. K. Burns’s work in the show is also a text: for *Overture* the gallery has published a book derived from a lecture she gave on Nancy Holt for Dia’s artist-on-artist series, available to buy or read at the exhibition. Burns figures intimacy with form through a citational relationship to a feminist lineage of post-minimalism. Following Burns’s reading, Holt’s work serves as a historical ground for the works in the exhibition, in that material reduction facilitates formal manifestations of labor and location, both spatial and temporal.

Burns writes that the open cylinders of Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* (1973 – 1976) are “lens-based tools,” calling to mind the photographs in the exhibition by Zoe Leonard. Her *August 6, frame 32* (2011 – 2012), is like Holt’s viewfinders in its orientation towards the sun; rather than illuminating the scene, sunlight becomes a material aspect of the work. Leonard, though, points her camera directly at it, overwhelming the photographic process. The result is an overexposed image, with the sun appearing as an absence of color and the white of the paper, in a grey field of overcast sky. Absent a horizon, the print is grounded instead by the

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apprehension of its process and construction. Leonard's second photograph in the exhibition, *Roll #3* (2006/16) is a contact print of ten images printed in 2016, from a sequence of exposures made on a rooftop a decade earlier. In addition to the time-lapse in production evident in their dating, the images index the passage of time as a sequence of exposures. Captured in quick succession, they follow a flock of birds traversing the skyline. The uninflected grid of a contact sheet underscores the subtle variations between each frame, showing the camera's movement and changing orientation. In this examination of a camera's means of producing time through the composition of photographic form, the fleeting movements of birds are registered as the deviation between static points.

As in Leonard's sun photographs, the ideological form of photography comes into view in Carissa Rodriguez's work in the exhibition. In *All the Best Memories are Hers* (2018/2019), Rodriguez used images captured by EmbryoScope (a biomedical hybrid of an incubator and digital-imaging technology, designed to create images of the human embryos it contains), which are included in *Overture* as a gelatin-silver composite of five embryos (the images were originally printed separately in her 2018 exhibition *The Maid* at Sculpture Center). This cellular scene is manipulated twice—the first being the photographic capture that is its very condition of visual and biological possibility, and then in its compositing by Rodriguez into a single image. If Leonard's *August 6, frame 32* contests the extra-compositionality of its astronomical source by photographing it directly, Rodriguez's image seems to trouble the possibility of extra-compositionality. Everything in the image (the embryos, the lighting) exists for and by the composition, indexing the historical discourse of biomedicine as an aesthetic regime in which the abstraction of the microscopic performs a realism of the highest degree (and lowest depth of field).

An earlier realism enters the exhibition in Jason Hirata's three wall-mounted pieces from his series "Fodder" (2015–16/2019). Hirata has cropped portions of Goya's plate "Gracias á la alomrta," from the folio *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820)—which shows a group of famished peasants sharing food from a pan—and copied them, by hand, in black walnut ink. The copies were then mounted on watercolor paper and sheets of galvanized steel. Goya's original caption, translated as "thanks to the grass-pea," expresses sardonic gratitude for this biological irony that while the grass-pea is blight-resistant, when eaten for sustained periods (as in times of dire need), it can cause lathyrism. On each work, Hirata has inkjet printed either the General Electric logo or the insignia of the Hotel Pierre in New York (where GE's former CEO Jack Welch delivered his speech "Growing Fast in a Slow Economy"). Hirata has illuminated one work with a prototype LED lamp manufactured by a GE subsidiary. In his series, Hirata sutures two historically disparate moments—Spanish famine during the Napoleonic Wars and the material manifestations of neoliberal corporate strategy—drawing, printing, and illuminating historical changes to aesthetics in relation to forms of precarious life.

The critical tangents figured in the exhibition emerge through converging formal languages. Earlier meanings of the word "overture" roughly correspond to the word "opening," as a kind of exposure and aperture, an absence framed by material. Lenses and embryos, extrusions reminiscent of the openings for Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, are also rhymed in the shapes and line in two vitreous enamel-on-steel works by Ulrike Müller. In these works' geometric abstraction, they reflect two postures of syzygy. The shared title of Müller's pieces, *Mirrors* (both 2013), evokes both their enameled reflectivity as well as a set of optical concerns. Without compositional symmetry, this title suggests reflection beyond their depiction of circular forms on black enamel grounds. The exhibition's only sculpture rests directly on the floor of the gallery. Two cast-bronze cylinders, reminiscent of patinated brass musical instruments, are placed parallel—like two miniature inversions of *Sun Tunnels*, except plugged up, with no air or light flowing through. Titled *Channel in C* (2018), this sculpture, by K.R.M. Mooney—who co-organized the exhibition with Callicoon Fine Arts—was produced from a

cast of the interior of a chime, a positive form derived from negative space. They are not musical instruments at all, but their invitation to misidentification as flutes or cornets is folded or unsettled by the fact that their origin is a separate musical device.

While the works in this exhibition approach technical media and formal discourse through quite divergent strategies, the radical formalism they define positions the indeterminacy of form that is to crop, frame, cut, draw, or fill an open question as a politics unto itself. An “overture,” while grounded in the spatial sense of opening, has multiple meanings. Today, the word connotes a technicality: an “overture” can be a formal proposition to commence some sort of procedure—legal, social, or otherwise. Archaic colloquial usages of the word correspond to its French and earlier Latin references to beginnings and favorable opportunities; allusions to the word’s literal significations of places and absences as spatial openings. Another definition of “overture” is as a component of Western classical music—a pithy musical statement introducing themes and motifs for a longer dramatic piece. However, confusingly, with the evolution of Western classical music and its abstraction from ballet and opera, the overture itself has evolved into what is called the symphony, no longer a preface, but a work unto itself.

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#### Contributor

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