

Nicole Klagsbrun



Installation View:

Switch

2009

Graphite, light fixtures

Dimensions variable

ADAM MCEWEN "SWITCH AND BAIT"

According to common definition, "bait and switch" is a form of fraud in which the party putting forth the fraud lures potential customers by advertising a product or service at an unprofitably low price, then reveals to them that the promised product is not available but that a lesser substitute is. Adam McEwen's "Switch and Bait" turns the strategy on its head in deed as well as name, bringing visitors to a suspiciously unassuming street front space with painted over windows and a "FOR RENT" sign, one of the few to have escaped the mass-gentrification of the former light industrial area into the wide, white spaces that Chelsea is today. Is 520 West 20th Street a space waiting to happen or a missed opportunity?

Exactly thirty years ago Walter de Maria installed *The Broken Kilometer* in Heiner Friedrich's former Soho gallery at 393 West Broadway (Interestingly in relation to McEwen's narrative, it followed Andy Warhol's first installation of the *Shadow Paintings*, a vast "environmental" work in many parts based on a negative reflection.) *The Broken Kilometer* is composed of 500 highly polished, solid brass rods, each measuring thirty-nine inches in length and placed on the floor in five equal parallel rows.

Stadium lights illuminate the work, creating an effect of a rippling field of ripe (albeit artificial) wheat, a

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perfect embodiment of the theatricality that Michael Fried described in his seminal treatise on the "performative" nature of Minimalist sculpture. *The Broken Kilometer* resides undisturbed in its glorious permanence at a time when nothing seems permanent anymore.

With his characteristically mordant stance, McEwen has taken the common model and formal strategy of the Minimalists – large-scale works with abstract, serially repeated units, their gravity given full value in even intervals along the floor – and, literally, turned it upside-down, draining it of overt theatrical appeal. In the disused space, forty-five industrial fluorescent light fittings, each measuring a standard seventy-two inches, hang from the ceiling in evenly spaced, longitudinal rows, conflating De Maria's exacting geometry with Dan Flavin's Minimalist readymade, while evoking the stark working conditions of the faltering labor economy. Each module is fitted with two "tubes," perfectly and perversely rendered simulacra of their light-emitting counterparts in dark, dense, light-absorbing graphite. The "circuit-breaker" or punchline occurs in a smaller adjoining space which, apart from a gallery assistant perched behind a desk, contains nothing but a solitary sculpture plinth. Drawing near, one perceives a wafer thin card standing on its edge. It turns out to be an American Express card, tantalizingly within reach. But on closer scrutiny, the credit card is a useless decoy, a finely machined graphite version of its indispensable self - a drawing tool at best.

In a reverse Midas-effect, McEwen has answered to the shimmering triumph of Minimalist art by creating a contemporary work that is eerily weightless yet freighted with leaden melancholy. As a current meditation on the many lives and deaths of art, he has created a space for the afterlife of a potent and contentious moment in art history, in much the same way as his obituaries narrate the future-perfect of the rich, the famous, the beautiful, and the notorious. But whereas his predecessors Warhol and De Maria created transcendent environments that prompted reflections of a more spiritual nature, McEwen's dead zone confronts us, literally and metaphysically, with the "filthy lucre" of our current material dilemma.