

KQED Arts

And God Said, Let There Be Neon, And It Sputtered

By Sarah Hotchkiss

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Let There Be (More) Light, the newest off-site exhibition produced by the Tenderloin's Jessica Silverman Gallery, is cleverly subtitled "An illumination by Jens Hoffmann." Former curator of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, Hoffmann organized the show of 22 pieces by 21 artists around a simple premise: all the work – save for one instance of fluorescent tubing – is made of neon.

But besides the double-wide storefront at 508 Ellis Street, less than a block from the main gallery space, what exactly is being illuminated here?

The 40-page full-color exhibition booklet includes a curatorial essay from Hoffmann that attempts to answer that question: "There are many connections between light and art. The most direct one is that they both enable enlightenment – one literally, by bringing light into a dark space, and the other intellectually and aesthetically." By this line of reasoning, art that uses light as its medium presumably kills two birds with one stone, providing literal *and* figurative illumination.



Adriana Martinez, 'TODO LO QUE BRILLA ES INFORMACIÓN (EVERYTHING THAT SHINES IS INFORMATION),' 2016.
(Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery; Photo by John Wilson White)

Yet without context (the curatorial essay mentions exhibition artists Joseph Kosuth and Keith Sonnier, but fails to specifically address works by any other artists in the show), the bright lights and glowing signs of *Let There Be (More) Light*, however brilliant and self-reflexive, are utterly opaque.

Sure, artworks exist free of exhibition essays, wall texts, or artist statements all the time. But the show promised enlightenment, and we can't get there all by ourselves, even if the warm hum of neon provides a meditative soundtrack to the viewing experience.

The wall-mounted neon text that dominates the show seems to promise meaningful messages, from Jonathan Monk's monosyllabic but multicolored *Fall* to Adrian Martinez's *TODO LO QUE BRILLA ES INFORMACIÓN*, translated as "everything that shines is information." But not all information is knowledge, and so these free-floating fragments of text begin to blend together, differentiated only by a particular artist's typeface and neon color choices. Alfredo Jaar favors a tall and slender font; Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, a perfect cursive.

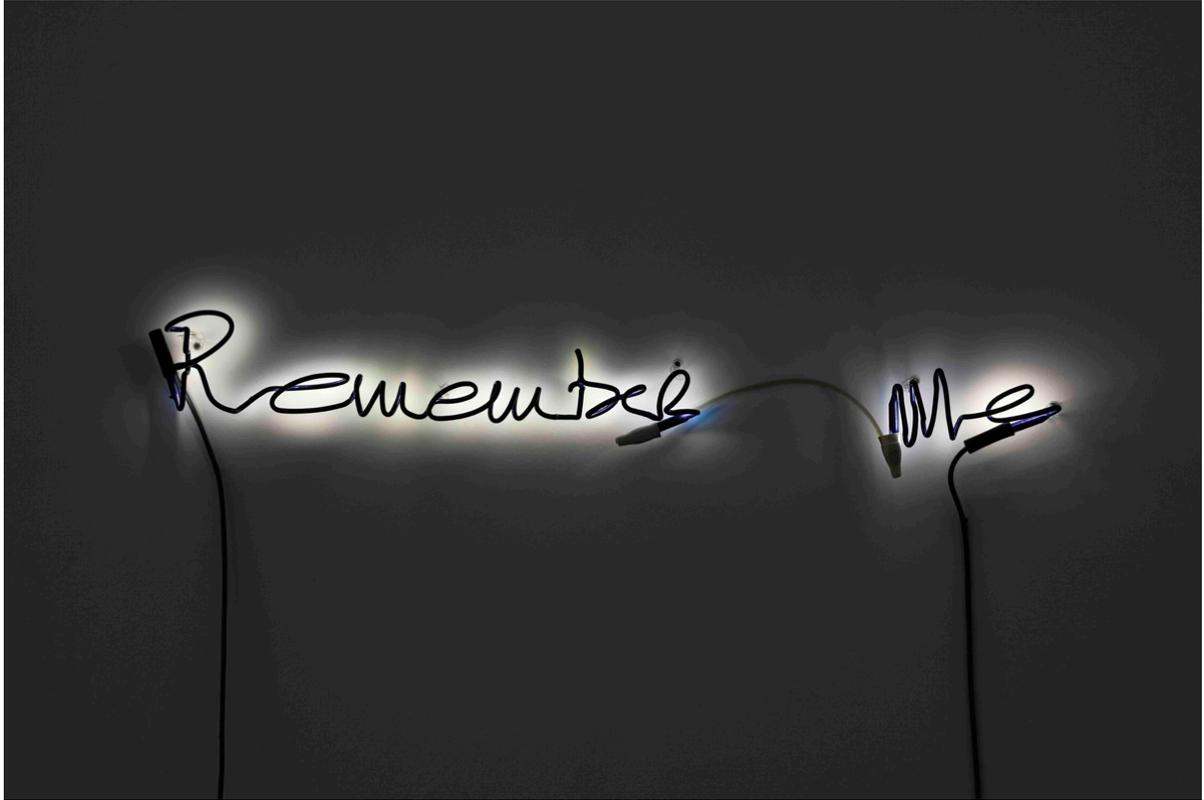
The show's standouts are its more abstract, wordless elements, where the pressure to derive meaning is relieved by pure aesthetic enjoyment: Mai-Thu Perret's *Uncle Toby (Yellow)*, Paulina Olowaska's *Natascha*, and Keith Sonnier's *Circle Portal A*.



Keith Sonnier, 'Circle Portal A,' 2015. (Courtesy of the artist and Maccarone, NY/LA)

To see *Let There Be (More) Light*, visitors must first stop by the main gallery (currently showing a beautiful collection of 1960s “portal paintings” by Suzanne Blank Redstone) to get a key-holding gallery employee to open the project space. This process, though roundabout, has the benefit of providing visitors with someone to answer any questions they might have about works in the show. Because even though knowledge of Laurence Sterne’s 18th-century novel *Tristram Shandy* isn’t necessary to viewing Perret’s elegant yellow flourish and identifying it as an illustration therein, it’s a good story, and it makes the work – in my opinion – far more intriguing.

Further research – should the visitor be so inspired – can be undertaken via the internet after visiting the show. There, we read of Warsaw’s centrally planned “neonization” and its influence on Olowska’s practice. We refresh our memories of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, referenced in Glenn Ligon’s piece. And we learn Steve McQueen’s *Remember Me* is one of a set of 77 neon texts, each rendered in a different handwriting.



Steve McQueen, 'Remember Me,' 2016. (Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London; Photo by Rebecca Fanuele.)

Ultimately, further research likely won't help us understand why all these works were gathered into one double-wide storefront for any reason beyond their shared materiality. And maybe that's enough of a curatorial premise. It's just not a path toward intellectual or aesthetic enlightenment, even if God did provide a quote for the exhibition title.

Let There Be (More) Light is on view at 508 Ellis Street in San Francisco through Nov. 19. For more information, visit jessicasilvermangallery.com.