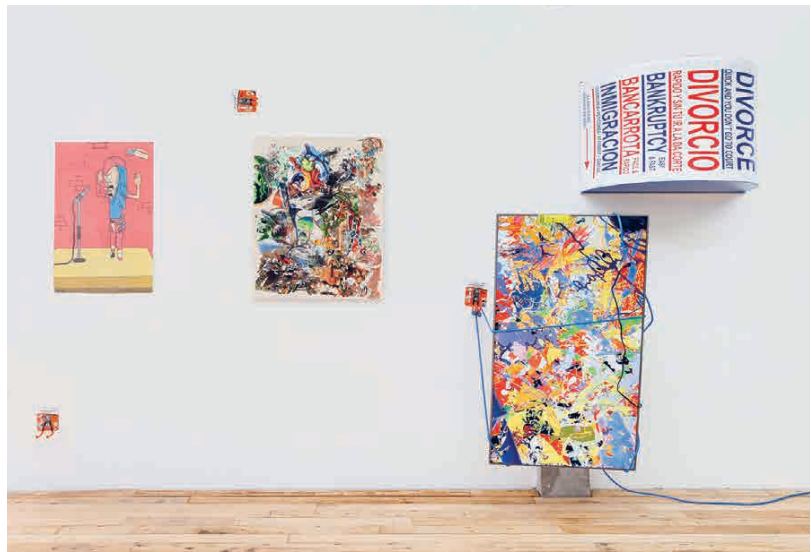




Korakrit Arunanondchai
 2012-2555, 2012
 Installation view at MoMA
 PS1, New York, 2014
 (c) 2014 MoMA PS1,
 New York. Photography by
 Matthew Septimus

Borna Sammak
 "All Dogs Are Pets,"
 installation view at JTT, New
 York, 2014. Courtesy the
 Artist and JTT, New York
 Photography by Charles
 Benton

Michael E. Smith
 Installation view at The
 Power Station, Dallas, 2014
 Courtesy of the Artist and
 The Power Station, Dallas
 Photography by Chad
 Redmon



Korakrit Arunanondchai

MoMA PS1 / New York

Nestled at the back of the first corridor after entering the main building of MoMA PS1, in a somewhat narrow rectangular room, is the work of Korakrit Arunanondchai — his first museum exhibition in the United States. Arunanondchai was born in Bangkok in 1986 and attended the Rhode Island School of Design and Columbia University. The young artist now occupies a room that recently housed works by the late Mike Kelley (1954–2012) and before that Ed Atkins (British, 1982). If Mike Kelley and Ed Atkins had a love child, it could easily have been Arunanondchai. Not limited to one particular medium, the exhibition features a range of works including fabric beanbag chairs, painted canvases constructed out of denim, metallic paint and collage, and video works. The artist uses a rich, abstract narrative video format to arrive at sculptures and paintings, not unlike the dynamic position embraced by Matthew Barney.

It's as if Arunanondchai takes screenshots of various chapters of his experience. The result is chaotic, colorful and outlandish but also somehow good. The work has a capacity for glamour and glitz, but the use of fire — seen in the burned fabric elements in his stretched canvases — suggests an underlying darkness that at times feels close to breaking through the surface. In the entire exhibition, which also features a live performance, there is one work that stands out, mainly because it almost doesn't belong. In its odd, left-out status, it is the anchor of his approach. Titled *2012–2555* (2012), the piece consists of a performance, a two-channel video, flatscreens, metal, wood, plastic, digital printing on canvas and vinyl, fluorescent lights and plastic flowers. In the foreground is a large canvas piece, layered and shiny from geometric cut-and-pasted silver paper, that is unmistakably based on Raphael's *The School of Athens* (1509–10). This moment of psychedelic recognition confirms that Arunanondchai's complex work not only corresponds with his own esoteric present but with a deeper, art-historical past.

by Katy Hamer

Borna Sammak

JTT / New York

Every evening, after dinner, there is a teenager that wanders the streets of the Lower East Side, craving inspiration, searching for something to do, finding a beautiful skate spot or meeting a friend for a prank. He cannot figure out exactly what he needs deep within himself to fill the void of the life that awaits him, nor can he verbalize what would put an end to his search. So for now he just wants to have fun and crack jokes. Why not be open to wonderment? Is there a place where he could get all this, all these answers in an instant? What if the magic deli does exist, a deli able to deliver anything to anyone? My bet is that this is what Borna Sammak's show at JTT is about. Sammak might have created such a place, where each artwork resonates with the wandering kid's dreams.

The show is meticulously filled with Deli shop signs bearing surrealistic inscriptions, cartoon references, flickering digital compositions, stickers, collages and boardwalk t-shirts. Like his previous double solo show with Alex Da Corte at OKO in New York, Sammak keeps exploring the imagery and codes of the deli world, as if it were the modern Aladdin's cave. The apparent disorder of the show also brings an energetic ring, together with the use of bright, primary colors and the diversity of media used. The messages are blurred and the signs are dismantled as if a bomb had exploded in the neighborhood, mixing the chaotic with the profuse.

"When I first started imagining the show, I thought it was going to be a sculpture show where all the stuff connected like a giant game of Mousetrap. What's that called? A Rube Goldberg machine..." said Sammak. Indeed, there is an attempt to connect, a continuous flimsy line that holds, quite unsteadily, the pieces together. And yet, the impression of playfulness remains.

by Alexandre Stipanovich

Michael E. Smith

The Power Station / Dallas

For his recent show at The Power Station, Michael E. Smith darkened the typically bright industrial space by cancelling all the lights, save one on each of the two floors, which blinked on as bodies moved in and out of the entrances to the building. The effect was caused by an actuator magnet hidden inside empty plastic milk cartons that were hung above the doorways, overturned like the teats of a cow and stuffed full of feathers. The cartons acted like gargoyles at the entrance to a sacred space. Much of Smith's work possesses this alchemical power wherein things are bound and absorbed into hauntingly poetic combinations: dead things come back to life, living things promise to fade, and what is inanimate takes on the countenance of vitality.

In this space, each object described a transaction between materials, sometimes violent, like a basketball encrusted with black rubber and bird parts, or sometimes tender, like a safety harness delicately festooned with hundreds of round oyster shells that jostled in the breeze like a chime.

The image of the harness appeared again in a video piece exhibited through a glass ceiling — a POV shot from a Coast Guard helicopter as it airlifted a stranded sailor from the rough Atlantic. The pace of the film is jumpy and the loop quick, making the narrative of the body's retrieval from danger to safety spin on a rapid cycle. In coincident elegance, with the doors open to the old building on a blustery day, wind came through in gusts, making the wings on a headless pigeon carcass, glued to the handle of a basket, flap as if at once coming back to life and dying all over again. Upstairs, two sets of children's pajamas lay on the ground. One was fortified with a simple wooden armature, forcing the arms and legs of the pajamas upright where plastic plates sat empty, waiting to be filled. The other pajamas were limp but for the torso, which kept the rigid shape of the metal shovelhead that occupied it. The gestures were equally intimate and unnerving, as with all of Smith's work, aligning the rapacious hunger of small bodies to time's inevitable feasting of them.

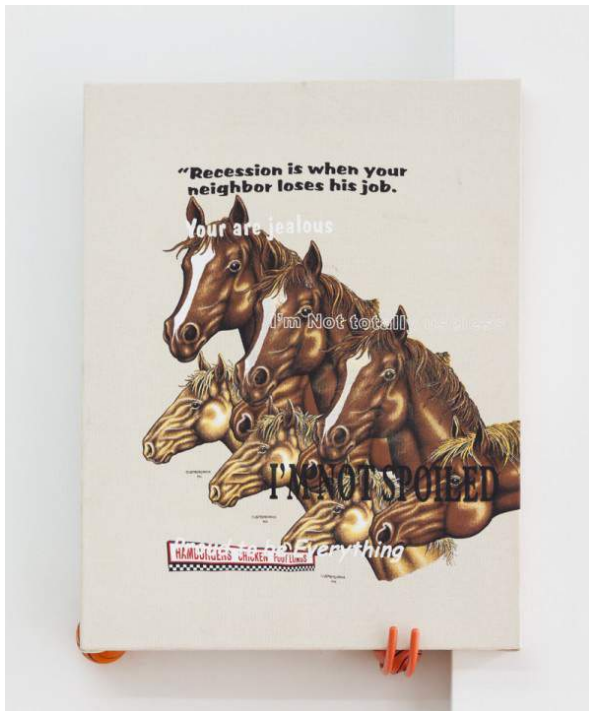
by Lucia Simek

Walker, Espeth. "Borna Sammak: All Dogs Are Pets at JTT". Daily Serving. Online: April 10, 2014: <http://dailyserving.com/2014/04/borna-sammak-all-dogs-are-pets-at-jtt/>



Borna Sammak: All Dogs Are Pets at JTT

April 10, 2014



All Dogs Are Pets, Borna Sammak's current solo exhibition at JTT, presents sculpture, painting, and video full of glowing references to 1990s American suburbia. Trafficking in the humorous young boys' fare of canceled Nickelodeon cartoons, Sammak's pieces are composed of sometimes repurposed, sometimes refabricated objects you might find at a Wal-Mart or strip-mall store. His work draws from the cultural garbage can, creating an aesthetic of overload steeped in a nostalgia for the cheap consumer items of our culture's recent past.

Sammak's "paintings," for example, are cacophonous collages of kitschy iron-on T-shirt decals. On one such canvas, Sammak multiplies two horse-decal prints into a herd of equine doppelgangers surrounded by the meaningless ends and beginnings of common T-shirt catchphrases. The work is an allusion to @horse_ebooks—a spam Twitter account that gained a cult following in the last few years for its unintentionally poetic, non-sequitur tweets designed to promote e-books while evading

spam detection. Like the @horse_ebooks tweets, the sentence fragments on Sammak's T-shirt canvases ("HAD A NORMAL LIFE"/"Proud to be Everything"/"You are Jealous") possess all the absurd, darkly existential humor of a robot poorly attempting an imitation of a human.

Sammak participates in a current trend among young artists making sculpture (for example, Alex da Corte) that involves removing domestic and recreational objects from their functional contexts and arranging them instead to juxtapose texture, color, and shape. Sammak squeezes small rubber-basketball toys and rubber duckies patterned like tiny basketballs into the cracks of refabricated acrylic signs, and mounts his works using grappling hooks left in their Home Depot packaging. Such clusters of media become uncannily affective, taking deep cuts from the cultural imaginary and rearranging them into new and arresting formations.

We might better consider *All Dogs Are Pets* through the lens of Jacques Derrida's philosophical notion of deconstruction, a branch of critical theory that denies the possibility of intrinsic meaning and seeks to

dismantle structural hierarchies by creating new, oppositional terms that are constantly in flux. Sammak's work is full of such fragments and juxtapositions, in this case of childhood play and shopping errands at small suburban businesses (or Home Depot). He wrenches his signifiers free from their context so that they might be reimagined in the realm of the absurd. Sammak does not seek to synthesize new structures in his work, but rather to create Frankensteinian hybrids that remain in continuous, chaotic interplay. In one work, catchphrases and fragments of cartoons rhythmically spew forth from a strung-up flat-screen TV as canvas (recalling Ken Okiishi's hotly discussed recent show at Reena Spaulings), like paranoid murmurings from the cultural subconscious. An adjacent work on paper depicts Beavis, of *Beavis and Butthead*, seeming to have an out-of-body experience at an open mic, while a thin, wavering paper outline of another Beavis barely shows up on the wall nearby. Beavis' form literally unravels. The levity of such deconstructive "play" is essential to Derridean theory. Sammak dismantles comprehensible meaning in his sculptures by acknowledging the absurdity of his source material even as his work in part pays homage to it.

Though Sammak's pastiche is admittedly trendy, exploiting a nostalgia for the childhood of the artist's own age group, its trendiness is buffered by what feels like a sympathetic engagement with the emotional contents of the cultural garbage can—a very humble, sincere space to engage.

Interview

ART, POWER, AND THE SANDWICH



LAUNCH GALLERY »

There is no relationship more tumultuous than that between a New Yorker and her deli. You love them for their convenient location, yet you hate them for their arbitrary pricing. They carry your preferred brand of potato chip but not your favorite face wash. They are there for you at all hours of the day, yet they probably never bothered to learn your name. Artists **Alex Da Corte** and **Borna Sammak** unravel the origin of our relationship with the deli and its most alluring gift, the hoagie, with their installation "As Is Wet Hoagie," on view now at East Village gallery **Oko**.

"The deli becomes your friend, but it's the friend that doesn't give a fuck about you," explains Sammak. Both Sammak and Da Corte hail from

Philly, where the hoagie reigns supreme. In addition to a hometown, the two artists share a dry sense of humor and a penchant for the grotesque. While they have maintained vague plans to collaborate artistically for years, it wasn't until microscopic gallery Oko opened its doors to them that they decided to explore the imagery, signage, and evolution of this modern institution. In addition to replicating the "deli experience," the installation alludes to the pursuit of our primal desires, manifested in the monstrous rubber sandwich at the core of the exhibit. The result is at once witty and truthful; truthful enough to trick many a passerby into popping in to ask for a cold-cut sandwich or to have a t-shirt printed. We caught up with Da Corte and Sammak to chat about the details of their collaboration, delis, and *The Simpsons*.

ALLYSON SHIFFMAN: How do you two know each other?

ALEX DA CORTE: We're old friends.

BORNA SAMMAK: We're old friends now?

DA CORTE: We're the oldest friends. We're both from Philly. Borna lives here, I live in Philly still.

SAMMAK: We text a lot, though.

SHIFFMAN: How did you go about conceptualizing this installation?

DA CORTE: We've been talking about a show abstractly for a really long time. We'd see something and send each other photos, always speaking to "our show," but not having a destination for that show. I think the concept grows gradually then you lock down what the format will be. When we found this space, we started thinking about the East Village, Claes Oldenburg's store, and how we're engaged with objects in different stores of the same caliber like thrift stores, bodegas, and delis. It became a compression of all those pieces.

SHIFFMAN: I presume having the hoagie at the center has something to do with the fact that you're both from Philly?

SAMMAK: Yeah. [*both laugh*]

SHIFFMAN: I learned a lot about hoagies earlier today on the hoagie Wikipedia page. Even though it's really just a sandwich, the history and the vernacular turn it into a piece of American iconography.

DA CORTE: When we were thinking about the reference for the image of the long hoagie, we were thinking about that episode of *The Simpsons*...

SHIFFMAN: Where Homer is eating the giant sandwich!

DA CORTE: Yes. And he can't finish the sandwich, but he keeps it around and it turns gray and he gets really sick. There's something about obtaining the hoagie that is about power. It's the suburban cornucopia: the big sandwich.

SAMMAK: Keeping it around is the "as is" part.

SHIFFMAN: How does this piece fit in to your overall bodies of work?

DA CORTE: I think that this work aligns with both our work in different ways. My work is about theater and film and how the portrayal of those fantasies collapse onto real life. As artists, we're entertainers too in a way. I think there's an increased fascination with things that we see on the Internet or on film; we trust these images but then we also question them. What is behind that door? What is being fed to me? Then pulling that out into a physical space, making that digital world tactile.

SHIFFMAN: This installation is meant to be experienced from the street, but there are so many details you could only notice from inside—for example, that the platform the hoagie sits on is raised by Coke cans. I get the sense that you are sticklers for detail.

DA CORTE: I'll be putting something up, and Borna will say it should be over and down a few inches. You have to put the work out there and then react to it. If stuff gets under your skin, that's good. There are certain things we do where the language is garish or grotesque. Part of it is pushing against your taste. This isn't about taste, it isn't about pleasure. It's not very palatable at all.

SAMMAK: It was a fun thing for me to try to get sloppier. Thinking about how it would happen in a deli because they don't give a fuck. We touch on every New York City "What the hell is this?" store and how this façade came to look that way. Delis don't carry specific brands, they just carry "stuff."

DA CORTE: Time is money. It's sort of like art-making in the sense that you're pursuing something out of this sense of urgency. There's maybe no end goal, it's just about the doing.

SAMMAK: I really like the idea that those stores break off, like splitting atoms. The first line in the press release is about that; if you bought up a bunch of sandwiches and kept them around, could you then start your own deli? Each one is a supply station for the next one. The matter-of-factness to everything is the backbone of our thought process. Do delis even know that they specialize in food or is that an accident? Could a deli morph into one of those shitty t-shirt shops over time?

SHIFFMAN: Deli names are just as arbitrary. What's a good deli name you've seen?

DA CORTE: A deli around the corner from my studio in Philly is called "No Name II Variety Store." It's so fucking brilliant.

SAMMAK: There's a spot in Philly called "Jeff Cold Beer" that I named my last solo show after. It's recreated in the awning here. I like that in that phrase "Jeff Cold Beer," Jeff becomes an adjective; it's a degree of coldness. In Williamsburg there's one called "Produce Deli Seafood Meat," and I really like that that's an imperative sentence. It's like, "Okay, I *will* produce deli, seafood, meat." And so we made this shop.

SHIFFMAN: I'm curious in looking at your work if you consider yourselves optimists or pessimists.

SAMMAK: In life I'm distinctly a pessimist [*laughs*]. But in my work it goes both ways. Sometimes with my video pieces, I'll spend weeks making a really beautiful digital painting, and when it's done I want to embarrass it; I want to make it ugly or gross.

DA CORTE: But that's challenging those rules that we have for what is beauty or what is optimism. Is it walking around with a smile on your face all the time or is that just being realistic? I think we're realists, more than anything.

SHIFFMAN: What would you be pursuing if you were not artists?

DA CORTE: I'd be a cook.

SAMMAK: You'd be a cook? I'd probably be a graphic designer just out of necessity, but it's the most hellish, degrading work. [*all laugh*]

SHIFFMAN: Has this been mistaken as a functioning storefront?

DA CORTE: So many people have come in to see if we print t-shirts.

"AS IS WET HOAGIE" IS ON VIEW AT OKO, NEW YORK THROUGH SEPTEMBER 12.

FIND THIS ARTICLE: <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/alex-da-corte-born-sammak-as-is-wet-hoagie/>

PRINT

Luxembourg & Dayan Spin-Off OKO Gallery Features Mind-Altering Hoagie

BY ROZALIA JOVANOVIC | AUGUST 08, 2013



Alex Da Corte and Borna Sammak, "As Is Wet Hoagie"
(Courtesy of Oko)



Installation view, "As Is Wet Hoagie" / Courtesy of Oko

False eyelashes, smashed cellphones, and an individually wrapped pickle are all things seemingly for sale at a storefront in the East Village. Though the display beckons with illuminated neon signs that say “Hoagie” and “Hell Here,” the interior is otherwise dark. Peering in from the outer window is a mind-bending experience. Inside the space, there are two more storefronts, one behind another behind another — brick façade, window crammed with junk, and all. Beyond the final door we can catch a glimpse of a room with red-and-white diagonally striped wall paper, and on a low platform an enormous hoagie sandwich.

Nothing here is in fact for sale at this many-layered storefront, except the whole assemblage itself. It is an installation called “As Is Wet Hoagie,” by artists **Alex Da Corte** and **Borna Sammak** at **OKO Gallery**, a tiny space that is the grittier younger sister to the Upper East Side powerhouse **Luxembourg & Dayan**. And though the installation went up on July 13, the gallery door is currently locked and it can only be seen from the street until August 22, when its door will open at last.

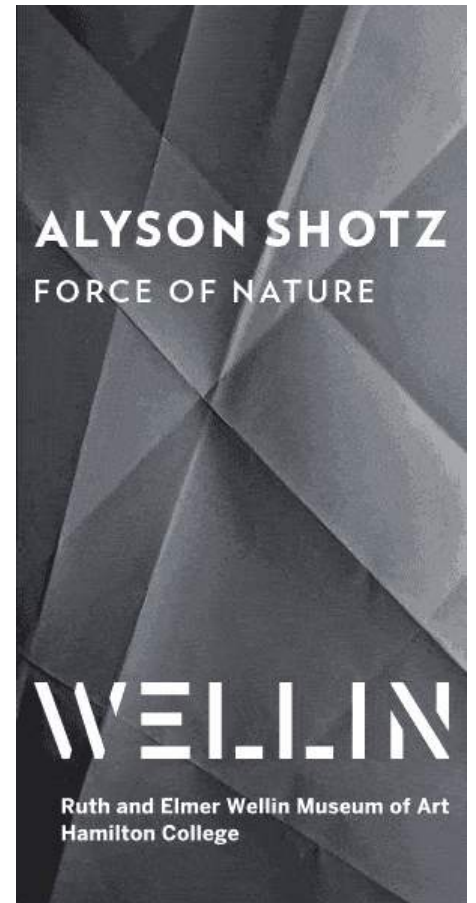


Though the shop has only been up for a few weeks, it has already caused a lot of confusion in the neighborhood. “Some people come in asking for sandwiches,” Sammak told ARTINFO on our recent trip down to OKO Gallery. “Others think it’s a t-shirt shop.” We were standing on the front stoop where, as if on cue, a man walked across the street and looked into the doorway curiously and asked what it was (“Is this a sandwich shop? A gallery?”), and when told it was a gallery walked away uttering, “cool” and “great stuff.”

Ideally meant to be viewed from the outside, the show with its multiple windows crammed with odd items riffs on the way bodega environments accumulate mass, have inconsistent narratives, and serve a variety of needs within a given community. “It’s not about beauty as much as it’s about convenience,” said Da Corte, “trying to understand what starts a deli that sells guns on the side, or knives on the side. How do these things grow?”

For Sammak, the deli is akin to a friend you see out of convenience. “You hang out with people who are within a few blocks of you,” he said, “even though there might be someone you like better in Prospect Heights who you never see. A deli is the same way, except it’s a friend you don’t trust.”

The giant hoagie at the back of the store is both a humble personal keepsake — both artists are from Philadelphia where hoagies and cheesesteaks are the source of great local pride — and a symbol of a mythical ideal. “It’s like the Sword in the Stone,” said Da Corte. “It’s about legend, or heroism, or sex.” The piece grew out of an episode of the Simpsons in which Homer sees the world’s biggest sandwich, a 10-foot hoagie, that he tries to finish but can’t. He takes it home, stores it behind the radiator until it turns grey, and eats it intermittently until it makes him ill. “For Homer, it became this desire to do it out of principle,” said Da Corte. “That in itself becomes like a kind of hero-quest.”





Installation view, "As Is Wet Hoagie" / Courtesy of Oko

The chaotic, vibrant nature of the show follows the spirit of a line of idiosyncratic exhibitions — including **Julian Schnabel** and **Dan Colen** — that have come before it at the gallery since it launched in 2012. OKO's curator, **Alison Gingeras**, has planned it that way to ensure that they resonate with the eclectic vibe of the neighborhood (the space that OKO gallery now fills was formerly a vintage jewelry store called Magic Fingers). As per Gingeras' dictum, the Schnabel exhibition, showed four works, from 1978 – 1981, but one at a time.

Though "As Is Wet Hoagie" has existed in its closed form since July 13, it is still a work in progress. And when it's done the entire thing will be for sale (for roughly \$40,000, with the hoagies for sale as editions). But its prolonged opening, which will happen with no more fanfare than the unlocking of the front door, is not the only oddly timed event in the life of the exhibition. On September 12, less than a month after it opens, the gallery will host a "finissage," or closing party, which is a holdover from curator Gingeras's time in Paris where it was "a big thing that people would do, especially when you would make something really special." She also wanted to do away with "that whole postpartum depression" that artists contend with after they've finished a show. "It's nice to finish a show with a bang."

Droitcour, Brian. "Artforum Critics's Pick: Borna Sammak." Artforum.com. May 24, 2012. Online: <http://artforum.com/archive/id=31064>

ARTFORUM

Artforum Critics' Pick: Borna Sammak

by Brian Droitcour on May 24, 2012



Extrusion grinds food down to tiny pellets and presses it into shapes. It is the manufacturing process that gives Cheetos and Doritos their addicting uniformity. The term is also used to describe the rendering of three-dimensional images, and for Borna Sammak extrusion's double meaning gives a sense of digital matter's substance. Pixels are a friable mass, dragged into form by the artist's mouse. An untitled video on view here (all works cited, 2012) portrays a skeletal tower, a model of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and dripping polyps of processed cheese coalescing and collapsing amid a field of Sammak's

own earlier abstract animations. Elsewhere in the show, a tower of clear plastic trash cans holds tiers of crushed Doritos, and a motley pile of dust from the snacks lines the top of a wooden panel painted nacho orange (both Not Yet Titled). The connection between pixels and junk food is made explicit in Cheeto, as Investigated by Expensive Microscope, a video borrowed from a scientist acquaintance, where points of color illuminate the contours of a Cheeto's airy depths.

Sammak's linkage of extruded snacks to digital images is more than a formal conceit. It expresses an experience of the body. To eat is to consume a series of identical food units alone at night at a computer, face lit by the screen's glow, fingers brightened by tangy orange dust. Snacks and images alike are digested and replaced by more of the same; body and machine merge in a whole that floats over a forgotten nature. This view of the world is underscored here by the rough physicality of the technical apparatus. The monitor displaying the untitled video leans against the wall, cushioned at its point of touch by a boogie board.

In the installation LAZY, the animated letters AZ are an appendage of urine-colored graffiti on the wall beneath the screen. Cords are not primly tucked away; they make flaccid arcs on the wall and cross the floor, stretching from all the monitors to meet at a single outlet. Everything on view is viscerally connected by one electric digestive tract.

HANNA LIDEN
"Short List"
The New Yorker, May 21, 2012



Short List

KRISTIN BAKER: Geiss, 76 Grand St. 212-625-8130. Through June 23. **LILLIAN BASSMAN:** Staley-Wise, 560 Broadway, at Prince St. 212-966-6223. Through May 26. **MICHAEL BAUER:** Cooley, 107 Norfolk St. 212-680-0564. Through June 17. **MICHAEL DELUCIA:** Eleven Rivington, 11 Rivington St.; 195 Chrystie. 212-982-1930. Both shows through June 2. **VLATKA HORVATH:** Uffner, 47 Orchard St. 212-274-0064. Through June 24. **XYLOR JANE:** Canada, 55 Chrystie St. 212-925-4631. Through June 3. **HANNA LIDEN:** Maccarone, 630 Greenwich St. 212-431-4977. Through June 16. **JULIA ROMMEL:** Bureau, 127 Henry St. 212-227-2783. Through June 10. **BORNA SAMMAK:** JTI, 170A Suffolk St. jtnyc.com. Through June 10. **NOLAN SIMON:** 47 Canal, 47 Canal St. 646-415-7712. Opens May 17. **STURTEVANT:** Brown, 620 Greenwich St. 212-627-5258. Through June 23. **ERIKA VOGT:** Subal, 131 Bowery, at Grand St. 917-334-1147. Through June 10. **"SURFACE AFFECT":** Abreu, 36 Orchard St. 212-995-1774. Through June 24.

Archey, Karen. "Borna Sammak Opens Video Exhibition in Best Buy, New Yorkers Annoyed." Artfagcity.com. October 9, 2009. Online: <http://www.artfagcity.com/2009/10/09/borna-sammak-opens-video-exhibition-in-best-buy-new-yorkers-annoyed/>



Borna Sammak Opens Video Exhibition in Best Buy, New Yorkers Annoyed.

by Karen Archy on October 9, 2009



I can only imagine what the handful of potential Best Buy customers were thinking when they happened upon Borna Sammak's video installation at the retailer's SoHo location last night. Perhaps, "Only in New York City do I try to buy a High Def TV and I walk into a fucking art opening!" Sammak's installation primarily takes place in Best Buy's lower level "Home Entertainment" floor, subsuming every TV monitor available. Made specifically for HD equipment, the intensely optical video-paint-

ings drew a packed store, allowing little room for visitors to browse around the installation, let alone shop. The artist worked with curator Thomas McDonnell who conceived of locating Sammak's work in Best Buy.

Producing endless works with a distinct retinal aesthetic, Sammak processes footage taken from nature documentaries such as Planet Earth—the sort of programming usually seen on Best Buy's monitors. McDonnell even thought to utilize the store's Surround Sound demonstration unit. Upon pressing its "demo" button, the viewer is greeted with a wave of sound corresponding to Sammak's videos.

McDonnell comments in an interview on Art in America between himself, artist Kari Altmann and Sammak that Best Buy ranks among one of the only locations carrying enough high-definition AV equipment to exhibit Sammak's video series. Museums would even be stretched to facilitate the work. Although this location obviously comes with some conceptual ramifications — it's hard to tell to what degree the artist and retailer's relationship is hostile or symbiotic — the installation was successful in utilizing the space inventively not to mention drawing a sizable art world crowd. Speaking to the latter, AFC intern Matthew Wells Gaffney overheard a cake-carrying sorority girl outside the store, "Like wow, is Best Buy the new hot spot or something?" We asked ourselves the same question.

Konyha, Keehnan. "One Night at Best Buy." *Art in America*. October 6, 2009. Online: <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2009-10-06/kari-altmann-thomas-mcdonnell-bornasammak/>

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

One Night at Best Buy

by Keehnan Konyha on October 6, 2009



Borna Sammak: Best Buy was arranged by artist and curator Thomas McDonnell. Here, like-minded artist Kari Altmann asks Sammak and McDonnell about the politics of borrowing corporate space, technical specifics, and why it somehow leads back to drawing.

KARI ALTMANN: How did you come to match Sammak's video with Best Buy?

THOMAS MCDONNELL: Borna's videos are made specifically for display on high-definition screens. And Best Buy is the largest American retailer of HD technology. It would be nearly impossible to have a show at a gallery, or even a museum, that delivered the same kind of visual impact. Best Buy has the gear.

ALTMANN: This exhibition takes place during Best Buy's store hours. All the same, you aren't paying them, and this isn't a guerrilla "hack" of the screens in the store. What kind of exchange is taking place in order to insert Sammak's video into the store's operational framework?

MCDONNELL: I called Borna a couple months ago and told him about the idea. I think it made sense to him from the beginning. Not the case with Best Buy.

ALTMANN: How were you in contact with them?

MCDONNELL: Our first dialogs with store management were very much along the lines of, "Tell me why I should lose \$40,000 worth of business for you." When I explained that a lot of people who normally wouldn't patronize Best Buy would come through for this show, the advantages started to become clear. Though I brought in some stills from one of Borna's videos, we didn't really look at them, or discuss them. It was about being able to guarantee foot-traffic.

SAMMAK: Tom didn't say a lot, although he did say, "I think we should do a show of your videos on all the screens in Best Buy." Which, of course, sounded awesome, but I didn't really think much about it until the following day when I opened my inbox to find Tom had copied me on emails to store representatives.

ALTMANN: Did you have reservations about the context?

SAMMAK: I was apprehensive in the beginning. I didn't want to come off like I was advertising for Best Buy. As a member of the Free Art and Technology Lab, advertising is 100% antithetical to our mission statement. I actually received a rude email from a colleague saying something to the effect of, "Best Buy is another corporate tool of the man and his constant effort to bring us down and you're just legitimating The System."

While on some level that may be true, it's not how I see the situation. As Tom mentioned, my work is made specifically for HD screens, a technology that for the most part is completely inaccessible to me. Part of the reason I make this type of work was that I don't have a studio-I don't even have an apartment right now-and all I need to make these videos is my laptop and a place to plug it in. But to display the videos, there is no viable alternative, short of running return fraud, to doing business with "the man." And then to display these works in the natural habitat approached this issue in an interesting way.

ALTMANN: And the issue of foot traffic?

SAMMAK: I highly doubt any foot traffic is going to make up for "\$40,000 worth of business."

ALTMANN: How are the video feeds wired at this store?

SAMMAK: In the A/V section of the store, flat-screen televisions line most of the walls-in several places they're even gridded two or three tall. The general content is a mind-numbing loop of sports, movie promos, and nature footage. Initially, my hope was to break up the feed such that I could create massive compositions that would take up entire walls.

ALTMANN: But that didn't work out?

SAMMAK: Given the way the monitors are wired, this isn't possible. What I've done instead is design video that will be displayed on all those TVs so that the edges of the image bleed seamlessly into each other. The effect is more than a tile pattern, and has no end and no beginning, which is different from a bunch of TVs playing the same video.

In addition to the wall-mounted units, there are a number of "end caps"—stand-alone televisions that run in their own content—Chicken Little or advertisements for nonsense next-gen cable services. Each of these will be getting its own video. A couple have super comfortable leather recliners in front of them. So that's nice.

ALTMANN: The videos you're showing comprise manipulated material from a variety of sources, including footage you've shot, downloaded, and ripped. Much of this source imagery is also the default material that would be shown on these same screens at Best Buy during regular hours. In a typical display at these stores, the viewer scouts for minute differences, comparing TV to TV to examine the way a screen-image rates against "reality."

SAMMAK: In this case, the relationship between source material and what ends up on the screen turned out to be more distinct than I had originally anticipated.

I look for simple, lush colors, compelling forms, unusual movement. Sometimes I find all three. Sometimes I find all three situated in a video in such a way that I can't I can't pull them out without also pulling the object

they're attached to. While I try to avoid discernible objects in my videos, or at least objects that I did not create myself, this is something I go back-and-forth on.

ALTMANN: What were the first videos you made of this type?

SAMMAK: They were constructed predominantly out of footage from Planet Earth. But Planet Earth is too cool in its own right, and the real content of my work is process, not source, so I moved to less distracting imagery. I ran around shooting videos with a pocket camera, downloading in bulk quantity from the Internet, mostly video game and movie trailers. I quickly noticed that my videos were taking on a much flatter quality, because all this stuff has the same pacing. The footage I shot is all paced at the speed of my hand moving the camera. And watch enough movie trailers, you'll realize that they all look and move the same.

ALTMANN: In several videos you repurpose footage into more traditional landscapes. What is the relationship of the landscape genre to the digital material?

SAMMAK: I came to a point where I felt I had fully explored how to deconstruct moving images according to one strategy. I wanted to see if I could figure out how to use the process to put them back together. I didn't want to do another all-over, abstract composition. I wanted to see if I could draw something. Drawing landscapes was a natural choice: They're as close as you get to being devoid of connotation. No matter how much you fuck with a landscape, it is still recognizable, and enjoyable to look at.