

ARTFORUM

Lichtzwang

by Nait Banai



Miroslaw Balka, *Lichtzwang*, 2006, speaker, recording, dimensions variable. Installation view.

Before committing suicide in April 1970, Paul Celan published his last collection of poems, *Lichtzwang*, loosely translated as either *Lightduress* or *Lightconstraint*. This compound title barely hints at Celan's complex and cryptic use of the German language. Disavowing Theodor Adorno's famous maxim "To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric," the Romanian-Jewish poet insisted that the only way to experience the war's unimaginable trauma was to use of the language of the oppressor. As Celan would explain in 1958, "[The German language] gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all."

As the nominal anchor of this group exhibition, the Polish artist Miroslaw Balka's sound piece *Lichtzwang*, 2006, continues the process of working through the past. Reading Celan's poetry in a hesitant and awkwardly intoned German, Balka reveals language's enduring condition as a fragile space of individual and collective construction. For better or worse, the rest of the works function like satellites revolving around and sometimes intersecting with both Celan and Balka's unsteady, multiple, and incommensurable points of origin. If Gabriela Vanga's *Lumina*, 2008, and Mircea Cantor's *Which Lights Kills You*, 2008, poetically exacerbate the tension between light and dark as both generative and destructive, Hans Peter Feldmann's *One Pound Strawberries*, 2007, Haim Steinbach's *Untitled (brush, dog chew)*, 2008, and Rachel Harrison's four untitled works from 2009 don't reach the lyric or psychological depths of Celan's fractured, elegiac mode. Whether the "lightness" of these deconstructive gestures, so far afield from the poet's tortured orbit, is liberating or historically negligent is subject to debate. They certainly signal a breach, but it is highly uncertain whether redemption and regeneration (linguistic, artistic, or social) will follow.

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