

# Art in America

## CHADWICK RANTANEN

### Essex Street

For small galleries, unadorned overhead fluorescent lighting is the industry standard. It's cheap, efficient, bright, and balanced, creating a relatively neutral viewing environment that allows for clear exhibition photography. The even glow of such lighting has become the hallmark of galleries on New York's Lower East Side, which, though modest in scale, are able to extend their ambition and influence nationally and internationally via exhibition documentation on the internet. As such, the lights have also come to represent the standardizing influence of image-sharing economies on the international art market.

For his exhibition of new works (all 2016), "Five Bars of a Deal," Chadwick Rantanen subtly directed viewers' attention to this lighting system by inserting two works directly into it. The pieces share the same title, *Fluorescent Fittings [Beehive/Black]*. Each is an electrical conduit in a French curve shape that was cast in black urethane and wired into one end of an existing overhead light fixture. The standard fluorescent lights installed in these modified fixtures hung at slight angles, spanning from Rantanen's adapter to the existing socket on the other side. Stickers adorning the plastic pieces depict a cartoon beehive buzzing with bulbous, cutesy bees—a naive visual metaphor, perhaps, for the mysteries of electricity.

Unlike works made in the tradition of institutional critique, wherein the ideological implications of gallery infrastructure is made overt or disrupted, Rantanen's project did not discernibly alter the quality of the light. Instead, his intervention foregrounded prevalent cultural attitudes toward design and customization. The fittings invoke the stereotypical Millennial consumer's demand for ornamentation that appears bespoke, or at least reflective of quirky individual taste. Though designed and installed by Rantanen, the pieces have less to do with a populist DIY aesthetic than with the

quasi-homemade quality of a customized iPhone case available on Etsy.

The majority of the exhibition comprised cheap LED signs and cuckoo clocks for which Rantanen also created custom battery adapters. The dimensions and shapes of the found LED fixtures vary, ranging from rectangles to ovals to arrows. Both these works and the clocks were hung with their fronts facing the wall, foregrounding the adapters. Rantanen's simple electrical devices allow AAA or AA batteries to be used in sockets designed for larger ones. The artist also decorated the batteries that were plugged into these open adapters, wrapping them with yellow and black stripes or red and blue ones, and affixing small plastic insect wings to each.

The vivid batteries stood out against the LED signs' black-paper backings, which were torn here and there to reveal glimpses of blinking lights. There is a confounding dandyishness in the way that the backs of these signs function as de facto pictures. In the context of a gallery, the reversed signs evoked shaped monochrome canvases, their pure forms disrupted by a small, contained burst of color. The bee batteries, of course, are irreconcilable with such traditional modernist compositions. Not only are the artsy-craftsy (but still plastic) objects aesthetically anathema to the high-minded monochrome, they also betray a concern for workaday usefulness.

Rantanen creates an ambiguous relationship between the works and their own functionality. The battery adapters reconfigure a simple technology by "hacking" it to make it more flexible: a wider range of power sources can be used. Yet, the signs and clocks still require an equally costly and polluting form of energy, and because the small batteries are ill-suited for the job, they will likely run out of juice more quickly. The bee wings affixed to the batteries restore aesthetic value to an area on the objects that is usually unseen. Though, of course, it is unseen for a reason. The cuckoo clocks are perhaps most emblematic of this condition. They sound their goofy chime, the cuckoo smashes its head against the wall, and still no one knows what time it is.

—Sam Korman



Chadwick Rantanen: *Black Forest Swiss House with Turning Goats*, 2016, battery-operated cuckoo clock and two artist-made AA battery adapters, 9½ by 8 by 4 inches; at Essex Street.