

ArtReview

Lewis Stein *Works from 1968–1979*

Essex Street, New York 29 October – 22 December

'Can I be more concise?' were all the words offered by the American minimalist painter Lewis Stein in the press release for his Artists Space show in New York in 1979, consisting of just a wall and a door – the culmination of the artist's interest in charged objecthood, which dismayed his gallerists as well as his devoted painterly following. Almost 40 years later, the clarity of his unusually cryptic body of sculpture – stern-looking readymades, fragments and objects sourced from the streets of urban America, conceived sporadically between 1968 and 1979 – only seems to have intensified, as they're re-presented in a sleek installation at Essex Street's subterranean white cube.

Speaking in an institutional language of industrial design, Lewis's collection of objects share an abstract relation to the regulation of public life and the control of bodies as they move through the city streets. At the very centre of the gallery space, four polished velvet rope stanchions, as seen in museums or banks, firmly

delineate a perfect square, imposing and inaccessible, ushering its audience to move around it along the walls. A sole metal guardrail flanks its one side, aimlessly blocking access to nowhere in particular, except for dividing the space further. A series of classic American anodised trashcans – first introduced in late-nineteenth-century New York for urban hygiene – further complicate easy movement through the space. A brightly shining metropolitan streetlight casts a glaring spotlight onto the ground; and on a nearby wall, a wooden billy club hangs quietly from a single nail, an artefact of state-sanctioned policing of disobedient bodies. Yet here, in the charged space of the white cube, it feels almost beautiful, certainly auratic, as any good sculpture.

Lewis's spatialised readymades are – like most derivatives of 'hostile' and 'regulatory' architectures – seductive in their violence, and thus position themselves as deeply antagonistic, in particular to the idealist project

of Minimalism and its pursuit of perceptual objectivity. Here, the viewing subject is never allowed free passage or objective orientation, but is instead constantly reminded of the surveillance, authority and control enforced on her body by and through objects – objects that conceal their force under the 'neutrality' of functionalist design. Too rarely have the sanitised aesthetics of High Minimalism been interrogated for its resemblance to those of, say, corporations; or how the dream of an institutionally prescribed 'meditative spatiality' in the encounter with art bears an uncanny relation to perverse ideas of 'public order'.

Lewis's sharp critique of institutional space extends to today, when control and surveillance in spaces used by the public have become no less pronounced. The politics of orientation and occupation inevitably changes when state-regulated space transforms into corporate space, and in this light, Lewis's readymades feel both impactful and prophetic. *Jeppé Ugelvig*



Works from 1968–1979, 2017 (installation view).
Courtesy the artist and Essex Street, New York