Erika Vogt
NEW MUSEUM

At the New Museum this past summer, Erika Vogt presented Stranger Debris Roll Roll Roll, 2013, a project at once austere and enigmatic. Related to her 2012 installations The Engraved Plane and Grounds and Airs, shown last year at Simone Subal Gallery in New York and at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, respectively, the work was framed in the exhibition wall text as an extension of the artist's interest in the subject of exchange. Yet in actuality, this theme felt sidelined here, subsumed within a more wide-ranging, albeit oblique, poetic reflection on the transformative nature of the studio.

Near the center of the installation, five monitors play hyperactive looped digital videos largely composed of briefly flashing still images and short clips; oftentimes images are layered one atop the other, adding to the frenetic effect. One video focuses on axes and rotation: We see a reel of film, the hands of a compass, a keyhole, and a low-tech computer animation of planets orbiting the sun. Another shows rapid-fire images of dollar bills. A third superimposes black-and-white photos of various objects atop a multicolored heat map of the ancient universe rendered from data collected by the European Space Agency and published on the front page of the New York Times. Little links these videos thematically, yet they repeatedly home in on historical or contemporary modes of conveying images or information—from sophisticated digital renderings of deep space to crude computer animation to newspapers to celluloid film. Whether obsolete or still in use, these technologies appear ghostly and abstract, cut-and-pasted digital impressions on sterile white grounds.

The five monitors are situated within a larger installation involving plaster casts of a variety of objects. These include an anchor, a bell, a screw, and a number of machine parts and other items whose names and purposes remain obscure. In creating these casts, Vogt altered the size of the original objects, making the casts larger, and painted them muted shades of black, gray, and blue. Half are suspended in midair, hanging from black ropes that run up to the ceiling through one or two pulleys and then down to the floor; there, each rope is held down by a second, heavier object. If the tools and parts on which these casts are based have “real world” use, that function is irrelevant here. These constructions utilize the objects’ weight—the casts hold down the ropes, keep them taut. Vogt’s eschewal of function or meaning in favor of this elemental property brought to mind the modus operandi of Bain Capital and its ilk, in which Rust Belt factories are closed, and once productive machinery is disassembled and raided for scrap metal that is sold off by the pound: the means of production turned back into raw mass, undifferentiated commodity.

In one video, we see the inverse of this dynamic, the distanciation of labor. Artist Shannon Ebner is seen in Vogt’s studio, rolling around on an office chair and chatting on her phone while the plaster casts dry on racks on the floor. On its own, the footage is quotidian, banal—another image of the networked office worker/artist, circa 2013. Yet this footage has been modified, superimposed with a bombardment of flickering images—angular shapes and fragmented drawings—a flood of meaninglessness that gives the scene a tense, alchemical charge.

—Lloyd Wise