

Newcity Art

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Art Break: Just Passing through Achim Zeman's Site-Specific Installation

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In a Northwest-facing corner on the twelfth floor of the Merchandise Mart, German artist Achim Zeman perches near the top of a blue-and-yellow ladder with a tape measure in one hand and, in the other, a precisely cut strip of vinyl tape so red it buzzes. He pauses to inspect the color-coded printout of the master plan for his installation. "Insight on site" is a vertiginous use of electric red vinyl tape applied directly to the wall in ambling lines. Zeman makes a mark on the wall, leans down to pick up a level, peels the back off the vinyl tape, drops the curled backing to the floor and presses the tape to the wall. He smooths it flat and parallel to the twenty-seven other vibrant red horizontal lines affixed there.

Scattered around the room, eight volunteers work similarly and in silence doing the same, over and over. Each devises their own way to place the vinyl tape properly and track which lines remain to be taped.

Nominally, Zeman is an installation artist, and this red-striped piece he's working on is located in the main speaking venue on the Art Chicago floor of Artropolis, an enormous contemporary-art-cum-antique fair taking place this weekend at the Merchandise Mart. The formula for his work is color, provided by

electric red vinyl tape, and geometric pattern—in this case, lines. These two visual elements he adapts to highlight some aspect of the room in which they appear. Here, he explains, it's all about the corners and creating graphic discontinuity that doesn't line up with the three-dimensional features of the wall.

Breezing through pages in a book that depicts many of his other installations, Zeman enthusiastically jumps through the discontinuous linguistic hoops of rapid thought happening in German but coming out in English. He fills pauses with gestures that explain his method, goals and the trajectory of his work. Zeman is a kind of painter-in-exile, one who wrote off turpentine as a clumsy obstruction to the perceptual experience of pure color. He ditched pen, pencil, acrylic, charcoal, marble, bronze and crayon; he sidestepped image-making for experience-making and embraced international, standardized color; he buried the primacy of the artist's touch in a byzantine conceptual labyrinth, brought on a cadre of volunteers and skipped oils in favor of applying undiluted vinyl color directly to the sterile, whitewashed walls of institutional spaces cleansed for the display of contemporary art.

Zeman's volunteers work together to apply the searing color and straight lines to walls, a work of visual friction. With volunteer help, the artist yields something that stands out from those gray, fluorescent-lit days. Simply moving through the room becomes an event. (Ian Epstein)