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Looking into *Ballroom* by Zilvinas Kempinas, at Yvon Lambert



Installation view of Zilvinas Kempinas' *Ballroom*, at Yvon Lambert



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ROLL TAPE

by Ben Davis

Zilvinas Kempinas, "Ballroom," Sept. 9-Oct. 16, 2010, at Yvon Lambert, 550 West 21 Street, New York, 10011

He's the maestro of magnetic tape. If you've ever seen one of Zilvinas Kempinas' artworks in action, then you probably remember it, because no one else really works in the same medium -- ribbons of magnetic tape. And air.

For his work *Serpentine* (2010), for instance, Kempinas positioned a fan on the floor, blowing upwards into a corner. Several slim ribbons of magnetic tape, unattached to the wall or floor, are caught in the draft, dancing wildly in the corner but staying remarkably confined to the space -- a kind of scrappy, homespun kinetic sculpture. For another piece, *O (between Fans)*, Kempinas placed two standing industrial fans facing one another, about ten feet apart. A large loop of tape remains suspended in the blast of air between them, trembling and seething but holding its place in the air. The effect is both eye-catching, and inseparable from the sense that the guy is weaving something out of almost-nothing.

The Lithuania-born, Hunter College-trained artist also makes more expansive installations: He represented Lithuania at last year's Venice Biennale with *Tube*, a walk-in corridor formed of long ribbons of magnetic tape stretched horizontally from one end of the room to the other, trembling and creating a shimmering effect as one passed through. But *Ballroom*, conceived for the Musée d'Art Moderne in Luxembourg and currently on view at Yvon Lambert, is something else again. It easily stands as his busiest, lushest work to date, suggesting a kind of post-minimalist disco dungeon.

You first peer at the installation, which fills an entire large back room, from between curtains formed of silvery mylar panels, hanging all around the edge of the space, which is darkened like a nightclub -- a theatrical note that is new to Kempinas' work. A grid of fans attached to the ceiling blows down at the floor. From the center of each fan, a red or blue light bulb dangles on a cord, to about knee height. The vibrations from the fans cause the cords to whip around, describing a cone in space, drawing circles of red or blue in the air. Meanwhile, on the floor beneath each fan, a large loop of Kempinas' signature magnetic tape floats just off the floor in the column of churning air.

As suggested by the name, the elements of Kempinas' *Ballroom* environment seem to be involved in some kind of organized, if chaotic, dance -- the lights swinging; the large Os on the floor hovering in place, buoyed by the air; the mylar panels around the edges rippling in the air currents, causing reflections of the lights to break into red and blue scribbles. These crackling patterns are the major new variable Kempinas is exploring here -- he's described the work as a "360-degree wrap-around Jackson Pollock experience," an indication that he's interested in a kind of immersive, readymade formalism.



Installation view of Zilvinas Kempinas' *Ballroom*, at Yvon Lambert



Testing the limits of *Ballroom*



"The system is robust"



Opening of Zilvinas Kempinas' *Tube* at the Lithuanian Pavilion for the 53rd Venice Biennale



Zilvinas Kempinas' *Serpentine* (2010) at Yvon Lambert's booth at the 2010 Armory Show

The best part, really, comes when you step into the space. This feels a little taboo, because the whole thing looks so delicately balanced -- but the system is actually quite robust, which is part of its charm. Stop one of the lights with your hand. Let go. A second later, its connection to the fan will cause it to slowly begin its motion again, until it is back to its intended path. You should tread lightly among the tape loops, to be sure -- but if you happen to step on one, no big deal. The moment you let up, it hops back to life, hovering just off the floor in the air.

Very occasionally, a loop will lose its way, for some reason wandering out of the air current and collapsing, and one of the gallery attendants will have to come in and set things right, which is easy to do. But this happens rarely enough that it mainly emphasizes how tightly constructed the whole system is. Physicists say that the stability of the physical universe is an illusion, with solid matter really being composed of millions of oscillating particles; *Ballroom* feels like walking through some kind of visual metaphor for that, the idea that stasis is just a configuration of seething elements, throwing off infinitely varying sparks of cosmic energy as a kind of side effect of their precarious, self-perpetuating orbits around one another.

Is this kind of talk overselling the work? Probably. Part of the charm of Kempinas' enterprise in general is the low-key temperament behind it -- *Ballroom* is unusually spectacular for him, but even with the addition of light to his repertoire, it doesn't have the showbizzy air of most contemporary installations. *Ballroom* has an immediately recognizable, populist pleasure to it, but it's not about pop culture; it's still all about an understatement of means, spinning art out of everyday stuff. It's a conjuring trick, and a feat of remarkable, if wholly relatable, craft to boot -- a lot of skill goes into making this kind of image seem to come together so effortlessly.

It'd be easy to underestimate work that's so elemental and fun, and I imagine that Kempinas could exhaust this vein of work (which I assume is why he is exploring new elements like light). But, you know, managing to hit notes of populist showmanship, an arty love of deadpan understatement and automatism, and old-fashioned, muscular craft, all at once -- that ain't nothing. Kempinas' works are great balancing acts, in more than one sense.

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Zilvinas Kempinas with *O (between Fans)* (2006)