



ARTFORUM



Tabor Robak, *Guts*, 2019, aluminum extrusion, expanded aluminum sheet, LED neon, UV-printed brushed aluminum frame, hardware, cables, 96 × 84 × 3 1/2". Photo: Johnny Fogg.

Tabor Robak

VON AMMON CO.

Four rectangular video screens mounted at the top of Tabor Robak's *MiniJumbo*, 2019, played ticker-like news streams of text that breezed by, familiar and forgettable: SMOOTH SAILING WITH ONLINE BANKING, for example, or LOOKING FOR ANSWERS? BIBLE. The literal meanings of these phrases are so anodyne that one couldn't help but try to decrypt the deeper meaning of his expansive video installations.

"MENTAL," the artist's solo show at von ammon co and the gallery's inaugural outing, was full of text and meta-text. On the four larger screens of Robak's miniature Jumbotron, which hung from the ceiling in this Georgetown warehouse space, the videos read like PowerPoint decks, full of clichés, but the animations quivered with the frenetic energy of a pinball machine or with the



throb of creative anxiety. UP AND COMING ARTS DISTRICT TIME, read one bubble-lettered phrase, which appeared for a split second over a bar chart before the screen transitioned like a TV ad to another message of corporate enthusiasm intended to paper over despair and inequity.

Cheap-O-Zest, 2019, an acrylic print over an LED light box, depicted a pill-shaped bottle in which energized particles floated in double-helix formation, referencing imagery associated with anti-depressants and energy beverages alike. It even targeted children, like the worst sort of pharma ad, with cartoon fish swimming through the drink. (Industry sells us on our insufficiencies from an early age.) Advertisements were the explicit subject of *Buzzsaw*, 2019, in which an LED-hologram fan—a cheap toy, the kind that can be purchased at a carnival or on the boardwalk—flashed generic logos offering services and products ranging from cryptography and military logistics to mass production and lab-grown meat.

“MENTAL” reflected the dark undercurrents of late capitalism. Robak is not the first to unravel this theme, but speculative science fiction is gentle compared to reality. Consider the dystopian videos that trend on YouTube channels intended for children—videos of the cartoon Peppa Pig distorted by bots into disturbing, auto-generated narratives—explored in depth by James Bridle, among other writers. Robak’s critique is more specifically attuned to how capitalism elicits feelings of frustration and ambivalence in the field of contemporary art. He sprinkles just enough hints throughout his well-crafted animations to show his cards: Stray words and phrases such as DON’T STOP UNTIL YOU’RE ALONE seem to reveal his own misgivings as an artist. Robak operates like a dark-web Nam June Paik, attuned to and appreciative of the byways underneath the Internet Superhighway, an underworld framed by Cialis ads and Turing tests.

Robak’s show also betrayed some concerns about the state of art—the messages that art sends and those that it encodes. In *Piggy*, 2019, one screen depicted Bitcoin tokens flying over a hypnotic video of abstract fractal imagery; a news ticker at the top of the installation streamed conflicting messages about status and anxiety, ranging from a list of cannabinoid products (CBD HAIRSPRAY, for instance) to hyped-up mantras (BAD TO THE BONE). *Neuron*, 2019, a four-channel installation of lava lamp-type



abstractions, was framed by a menu of medical services (BONE MARROW TRANSPLANT, PROPHYLACTIC VACCINATION) and their corresponding fees, illuminated like a casino scoreboard. These pairings of abstractions with ailments suggested a disturbance in the bridge between mind and body—a dystopian divide that may be deepened by art.

The highlight of the show might have been *Guts*, 2019, a line drawing rendered in neon and affixed to an aluminum extrusion, mimicking the effect of an illuminated sign behind a shopwindow. Instead of reading OPEN or BEER, Robak's sign offers a doodle of a gastrointestinal tract in distress. This squiggle of alimentary organs, glowing in red, azure, and magenta, burns in green-neon flames inside a yellow-neon house. *Guts* suggests a state of euphoria paired with intense agitation. There's no subliminal message behind irritable bowel syndrome. It's the sign of our times.

— Kriston Capps