

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Olga Balema: *brain damage*

By [Amelia Farley](#)



Installation view: *Olga Balema: brain damage*, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019. Courtesy Bridget Donahue.

Like the condition to which it refers, the exhibition *brain damage* does not just invoke a locus of injury, but also the diffusion of its effects. Across the flecked, uneven floor of Bridget Donahue, Olga Balema has scattered dozens of yards' worth of garment-grade elastic bands. They have been painted and artificially distressed; arranged into shallow, cobwebbed arrays in Balema's studio; transported in crates; and meticulously rearranged, in formation, in the gallery. The bands are variously tied, stapled, nailed, and tacked together to form a number of small provisional structures—what the press release says is “100% sculpture.” But Balema's work, in its elasticity, lacks the resolution of form that this absolute expression might suggest. Several of the nails appear to be structurally unnecessary; many of the bands are slack, while others are pulled

taut between the wall and a nail hammered into the floor. They frequently intersect: one axis meets another, and another, and so on. Each confederation of elastic bands, extending no more than a few feet off of the ground, is a score of intersections, drawing our attention to axial tensions—or playing us once more against our expectation of significance, of relation.

Brain damage is Balema's most economical solo show to date. Her sculptures (all 2019) are sparse but not severe; they are numbered—1 through 13—but don't progress throughout the room chronologically. The painted strings recall the cinematic trope of red thread used to connect leads across the bulletin boards of conspiracy theorists. Perhaps the connections will surface surprising relationships, or perhaps they are all coincidental and cold. As if to wink at the austere precision of minimalist sculpture—like the careful parallels and vertices of a Fred Sandback—Balema's arbitrary arrangements are characteristically tongue-in-cheek. If Sandback's "vertical constructions" refer to an upright human body, Balema's horizontal entanglements refer to a prostrate one. Low to the ground and without clear thoroughfares, the sprawling installation is conspicuously hazardous, refusing to honor pedestrian space. But that isn't to say that the matrices aren't somehow cartographic, like meridians or ley lines. The lateral infrastructure of *brain damage* addresses the under-considered architectural matters of the floor, concerning itself with the space just below the viewers' sightline.

If not maliciously intended, certainly the delicate build of *brain damage* is precarious. Its nervous highways organize into a situation which, apparently, indicates risk: a printed-out sign near the entryway warns, "Please tread carefully!" Balema's architectural interventions in the gallery space are easily missable; they are liable to be stepped on or tripped over. Most of the cords comprising *brain damage*, however, are not stretched, but flaccid, shriveled, weary—almost pitifully so. Connections are exhausted and unreliable. The damage Balema presents here suggests a kind of attrition: a slow, processual wearing-away; a frying of the nerves.

Balema's modest list of materials—elastic band, paint, glue, nails, staples—leaves out the occasional wisp of curling ribbon or organza, which are haphazardly tacked on throughout, as if by accident. These unexpectedly whimsical elements seem to be caught in the grid, like wet leaves stuck in a storm drain grate, or a still-fluttering moth freshly snagged by a spider web. Such details might leave viewers wondering what to regard, and what to disregard, in the overall material roster of the show. Balema's arrangements often appear accidental. Seen from above, the sloppy entanglements of *brain damage* might read like a decision matrix, or a game plan, where the elastic cords represent vectors between possible, contingent outcomes. The elastic medium itself is necessarily scalable, flexible, and contingent. It expands the field of possibility.

The total surround of *brain damage* has an aural quality. Perhaps Balema's interest in nerves, numbers, and networks is related to harmonics? Sound is an

effect of nervous excitement. The elastic cord, in its tautness, approximates a stringed instrument. If excited, as an auditory nerve, it could generate a musical note. Alternatively, the crisscrossed elastic resembles a set of patch cords connecting modules in an analog synthesizer. Not literally audible, *brain damage* can be regarded as a composition of mathematical relations, for example between the length of the string and the pitch it produces, or amongst the sizes of intervals in the plan of temperament. The musical technologies of *1* through *13*, untuned and out of order, imply intentionally harsh noise—a raucous field of sound. This composition is evoked rather than emitted. In their silence, these acoustic properties are latent—and, literally, suspended. All circuits are broken; all reception is cancelled.ⁱ

Contributor

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Amelia Farley is a contributor to the *Rail*.

ⁱ <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/07/artseen/Olga-Balema-brain-damage>