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Lena Henke

An Idea of Late German Sculpture To the People of New York, 2018

March 3, 2018 until May 13, 2018
Opening: Friday, March 2, 2018, 6PM

Lena Henke's exhibition in Kunsthalle Zurich presents a dialogue between two distinct bodies of work.

The first is an installation, which comprises seven sculptures made by the artist while in residence at the Kunstgiesserei foundry in St. Gallen in 2017 and 2018. A set of a half-dozen models was first fashioned by hand by Lena Henke in unfired clay. Out of this batch, three prototypes were selected to be digitally blown up in two identical exemplars, whereas a fourth one – titled *Stick* – was produced as a single piece. While these works retain a link to figurative sculpture (one of the pairs, *Ayşe Erkmen's Endless Knee*, looks like an abstract, Brancusi-like representation of this body part), they do so through architectural principles and are scaled according to Le Corbusier Modulor standard, standing at 1.829-meters-tall, which happens to match the artist's height. Lined with brightly colored agglomerated rubber, a material used to protect urban furniture, each of these sculptures could easily be mistaken for the building blocks of a children's playground, joyfully activating the physical space of Kunsthalle Zurich as a "substitute for a public square", in Rosalind Krauss' words (*Sculpture in the Expanded field*, 1979). The second pair of identical sculptures, *Aldo Rossi's Sleeping Elephant*, references Giorgio de Chirico's arches and Rossi's seminal *The Architecture of a City* (1966), in which Rossi looks at urban design not only from a functional perspective, but as a generator of aesthetic meaning, and argues that urban artifacts should espouse the characteristics of works of art.

The newly reconfigured age-old question of whether sculpture is autonomous or connected to its conditions of production is at the heart of the artist's Zurich mise-en-scène. Upon entering the space of the Kunsthalle, one simultaneously encounters an exemplar of *Ayşe Erkmen's Endless Knee* exhibited at floor level, and perceives its twin in the distance, resting on an industrial shelf. A spare part to replace the first one in case of wear and tear, or to be erected among another set elsewhere, in fact anywhere – highlighting, to quote Krauss again, sculpture's status as a "nomadic entity." This provision of independence is humorously echoed in the title of the last pair of sculptures, *Robert Moses' Mother Drives Through Wallis*. Here, the artist revisits a motif – a horse's hoof – that first appeared in 2016 in a show held at Real Fine Arts Gallery in New York, which is located just under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, a highway designed by Robert Moses, New York's mid-century autarchic urban planner, whose quasi-totalitarian views of the city as a rational and functional machine Lena Henke allegorically opposed with her flâneries in Dead Horse Bay – a small body of water in Brooklyn Bay named after the horse processing plant that borders it, and on whose shores equine bones still wash. Now, far away from the geographic and cultural context that determined their conception, covered in an industrial material able to weather snow and hail, these hoof-like shapes have become emancipated enough to go on a sightseeing tour around the mountains of Wallis, a most picturesque Swiss mountain tourist destination.

Meanwhile, Aldo Rossi's two *Sleeping Elephants* face each other across a field of moving chainmail to create an immersive landscape. Hauled by cables and motors which are moored to the institution's walls, the chainmail acts as a kinetic screen that constantly shifts the relationship between the viewer, the sculptures and their shared physical environment. Concluding this parcours, *Stick* originates from selection trials of prototypes during which a virgin brick of clay was perfunctorily used as a stand-in for an actual work, and which the artist decided to keep as is in the collection. Exhibited away from the rest, this sculpture functions both as a toy version of a Robert Morris *L-Beam*, a standard meant to expose the conditions of perception and display that grounds our experience of the other works of the series, and as a point from which to contemplate, unhurriedly, the second body of work that makes up the exhibition.

As questions of cultural and autobiographical nomadism are central to the works produced in Switzerland (this is the first time the artist has spent so much professional time away from her studios, in close to a decade), they are meant to be looked at in motion, swiftly – as one would a piece of urban furniture or public sculpture, out of the corner of one's eye. It is important to note that movement, and its concomitant term, entropy, cannot be reduced in Lena Henke's oeuvre to the perceptual conditions of sculpture, but also function as allegories of personal development. Hence, the artist refers to her mechanically actioned field of chainmail – cunningly titled *Vulnerable in the Moment of Control* – as a "character armor," a term borrowed from radical psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. Hand-knitted together, the patches of thin metal rings that make

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up the chainmail will tear in the course of the exhibition, bringing its motion to a grinding halt to become its own programmed ruin.

In 2014, for a multi-part show simultaneously held at White Flag Project in St. Louis USA and the Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten Marl, the artist – taking her cues from German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger’s systemic approach to multi-generational family therapy, which includes psychodramas and “family sculptures” – fused works from the museum’s permanent collection with the facial likeness of her own family members. The result, which incongruously anthropomorphizes Modernist sculpture, was recast in bright purple in her New York studio a few years later for the generational survey of German Art titled *Made in Germany 3* at the Hannover Sprengel Museum. There, left outside during the length of the show, their surface deteriorated, gaining with time an expressionistic patina that seems to call for a deeper – multilayered – prolonged viewing. A new sculptural form that arises from an image that successive transatlantic contexts of production and exhibition have rendered haptic.

Lena Henke, born 1982 in Warburg (Germany), lives and works in New York.

Curated by Fabrice Stroun in collaboration with Kunsthalle Zürich.

An Idea of Late German Sculpture; To the People of New York, 2018 is generously supported by Outset Germany_Switzerland, and Bortolami, New York, Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna / Rome, Montana Tech Components, Real Fine Arts, New York, and Dr. Martin Schittengruber, Agility Invest GmbH.

We would like to thank Atelierhaus Sitterwerk and Katalin Deér, Duscha Kistler and Felix Lehner for their additional support.