

# LENA HENKE NEW FANTASIES OF MODERNISM

BY ARIA DEAN

In the introduction of Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto* for Manhattan, the architectural theorist claims that New York City has been developed under an unspoken program "so ambitious that to be realized it could never be openly stated." The city, from the moment of its birth in colonial encounter, is driven by efforts to engulf man in his own fantasy, "to exist in a world totally fabricated by man."

Lena Henke's work is, in architectural terms, an intervention into this fantasy. However, we would be remiss to examine Henke's work solely as such—an intervention. Intervention lends itself to the programmatic, perhaps saying "not this, but this instead." Rather the mode of Henke's sculptures and installations might be more aptly identified as a series of meditations, where architecture and urban forms—and the ideologies that shape them—become raw material. If fantasy is, at its base, about desire, Henke's work introduces new desires and reroutes existing ones. She distorts modernism's fantasies of itself, carving into it space for the surreal, the feminine, and the personal, and corrupting its programs.

In a gross oversimplification, we might say that the modernist project, as it is enacted at the level of architecture and urban design, aimed to organize human life according to a pre-designated program. In Manhattan, Henke's current home, this program is the grid, designed by the Commissioners Plan of

1811. The grid—or 'gridiron'—shapes the island's block system, which in turn provides a theoretically rigid infrastructure for controlled growth and development. Koolhaas writes, however, that "the grid's two dimensional discipline also creates undreamt-of freedom for three dimensional anarchy." We could also say that Lena Henke's work strives for the kind of three-dimensional anarchy that Koolhaas writes of. Her sculptures are extrusions built over and amidst the logics of the rational grid and the very concept of the *program*.

Henke follows in the footsteps of the Situationists, favoring a mapping of the city from the perspective of its inhabitant—a particularly intimate psychogeography. It is intimate in the sense that we find her layering her own experiences over the built environment, twisting Koolhaas' words and reinscribing the fantasies of the men who built New York City with her own. In works like *City Lights (Dead Horse Bay)*, she takes interest in the historical oddities of her adopted city and superimposes her personal vision onto the 'objective' mapping of it from above, resulting in visually distorted perspectives and power relations. *City Lights (Dead Horse Bay)* presents a bronze cast of an aerial map of a surreal cityscape, identifiably somewhere in New York City based on the hallmark watertower and the invocation of Dead Horse Bay, a small body of water in Brooklyn creepily named for its housing a number of horse-rendering plants in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.





Today, the bay is known for the trash that washes up on it daily from nearby leaking landfills. Henke's treatment converts this quirky New York City landmark into a gothic landscape inflected by her German roots.

Likewise, in her ongoing *Female Fatigue* series, Henke explores a kind of intimacy with space unique to dense urban centers traversed on foot. In the series, Henke's abstracted feminine nudes molded out of sand are nestled in metal sculptures that directly recall the sleek facades of Manhattan's skyscrapers—similar to those that appear in her *Relief* works (2014), larger feminine forms protruding from sandbags. The titles of the works in the *Female Fatigue* series refer vaguely to different locations around the city: *Our AT&T*, *Their New Museum*, *My Crane Collapses*. Each sculpture abstractly chases after the formal structure of each space. There is a delightful disjunction in these works, organicism and unnaturally hard edges cozied up to one another. The women appear to melt—"fatigued"—into the urban block, perhaps speaking to the psychic tax of city life. At the same time, the titles give a sense of ownership over space not unlike the way many might designate *my bodega*, *my train stop*.

The *Female Fatigue* series also finds Henke once again appropriating and detouring the words of the men who loom large in the history of modernist architecture and urbanism. From one angle, the sculptures read as an inside joke about Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer's "form follows feminine," his fetishization of the "sensual curve." Niemeyer famously rejected, "straight angles [and] the straight line, hard and inflexible, created by man," in favor of the curves found in nature and "the body of a beloved woman." Henke cleverly appears to follow in Niemeyer's approach, pairing disintegrating damsels in distress with hollow, steel phalluses. The joke is on the old architect though; a fetish is a fetish, and a building is still a

shell. Henke seems to question which is preferable: an empty steel cocoon built to last or a voluptuous, full figure destined for decay?

While Henke's anti-rationalism could certainly be posed as an overtly feminist, and perhaps anti-colonial series of interventions, inserting feminine forms and narrative methods into traditionally masculine constructions, the work still appears not to be *about* these things, but *of* them. Henke, while attracted to these concrete explorations, ultimately sees them as raw resources to be mined. She takes the rationalism that the city—and perhaps not solely NYC itself, but all that it stands for in its development—is founded on and uses it as material against itself. The city becomes malleable, the block turns to putty in Henke's hands.

The resulting fantasy is one that draws indiscriminately from Henke's imagination, research interests, and personal history, combining them all into a surreal, materially-driven constellation of objects. Her sculptures range in size and her processes vary—from portable ceramic totems shaped like deformed horse hooves (*TK*, shown in *Heartbreak Highway* at Real Fine Arts, New York), to large scale minimalist architectural installations (*Core Cut Care* at Oldenburger Kunstverein). It is a program with no real program, driven by whim and chance. Robert Moses, who served as the city planner for New York City and is known as the master builder of 20<sup>th</sup> century New York, once said that "to operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax." Henke takes a meat ax to Moses' own system, hacking it up and scrapping it for parts. The work of Moses and others like him is subsumed into a mutant visual language all of Henke's own. The grid melts down into a new fantasy.

The red tower, 2016 (opposite page) Eure Frankfurter Küche, 2016 (p. 141) Ascent of a Woman, Model, 2017 Model for the Highline Plinth, NYC (pp. 142-143) All images Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna/Rome

