

# ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 2015



TOP TEN

## Anna-Sophie Berger

Vienna-based artist Anna-Sophie Berger studied fashion design and transdisciplinary art at the city's University of Applied Arts. She has mounted solo exhibitions at JTT and Ludlow 38 in New York; 21er Haus, 21er Raum, and Mauve in Vienna; and, most recently, White Flag Projects in Saint Louis.

### 1. CHESS PIECE, WESTERN ISLAMIC LANDS, CA. EIGHTH–TENTH CENTURY CE

I took a picture of this abstract, animal-like chess piece when it was displayed, alone, at the Cloisters in New York. Isolated from the rest of its army, the carved jet object seemed less strategic or poised to strike than vulnerable and pathetic, a totem for existential struggle. I refer to the photo's subject as "the chess king," using it as a metaphor for my own touristic lifestyle as I traverse geographies and cultures: I visit museums not only to understand an environment but also to counter my feelings of being an outsider by engaging a narrative of continuous, universal human history. Ironically, I recently discovered that my itinerant king is actually a knight, a dutiful figure with limited moves.



Chess piece, ca. eighth–tenth century CE, jet, 2 x 1 3/8 x 1 3/8".

### 2. VENUS OF WILLENDORF, LOWER AUSTRIA, CA. 29,500 BCE

At the heart of the collection of the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna is one of the most famous Paleolithic representations of the body—a four-inch-tall oolitic limestone carving that is controversially referred to as Venus. The name leads to misunderstandings by linking the figurine, whose intended purpose remains under speculation, to a classical concept of the female, emphasizing the differences between the latter's standard of beauty and the former's unbridled voluptuousness. While it may be historically invalid to individualize the sculpture, as it likely depicts a concept—fertility—rather than a person, I naively think of this incredibly sensual object as a portrait.



Venus of Willendorf, ca. 29,500 BCE, limestone, 4 1/4 x 2 1/4 x 2 1/4".

### 3. TERRA SIGILLATA BOWL, SOUTH GAUL, CA. 100 CE

I'm drawn to objects that have a complex genealogy, particularly those that display traces of the archaeological politics of their time. The collection of the Vorarlberg Museum in Bregenz, Austria, includes a series of Roman terra sigillata bowls that were found broken but have since been restored. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was common conservation practice to disguise the broken parts of artifacts and to return them as faithfully as possible to their original forms. More recently, critical consensus has shifted to favor methods that make visible repaired or missing components. Historical, material reality and the politics of science merge at these sites of fracture, perhaps forming a new sculptural entity altogether.

### 4. IVORY MODEL OF THE HUMAN EYE, ORIGIN AND DATE UNKNOWN

My high school in Kremsmünster, Austria, adjoined a Benedictine abbey, and I often visited the museum of its Sternwarte Kremsmünster observatory when I was growing up. Our curriculum regularly made use of the collection, which included this strange ivory eye. Little to nothing is known about the sculpture; it looks like some macabre sci-fi prop, but it is in fact a pedagogical tool. Comprising eleven pieces, the eye can be disassembled to reveal the organ's anatomy—an exercise that brutally reaffirms the material finitude of a sense so crucial to our perceptions of the world and the self.



Model of the human eye, n.d., ivory, glass, 4 1/2 x 2 x 2". Photo: Alexander Berger.

### 5. TWO-HEADED CALF, AUSTRIA, 1909

Collecting biological anomalies has been integral to the ways in which we categorize normalcy. This specimen is, unsurprisingly, one of the most popular items in the Sternwarte Kremsmünster's collection. As a child, I kept returning to it, drawn by a mixture of sadness, disgust, and extreme curiosity. It fascinated me that this creature, whose survival I was told had been impossible, could be so vividly preserved.



Two-headed calf, Austria, 1909. Photo: Alexander Berger.

### 6. KOUROS OF TENEA, CA. 560 BCE

Kalos kai agathos, "beautiful and good," is a Greek phrase that might be associated with classical kouros. One such nude youth, the so-called "Apollo" of Tenea, is housed at the Staatlichen Antikensammlungen München. What excites me about ancient Greek sculpture is the irreconcilable contrast between the classical ideal of the permanence of beauty and the evidence of time and vulnerability each object now bears. The arm of Apollo is now fragmented, the kouros, once a symbol of stability, rendered mortal.

**7. SEATED FIGURE, INLAND NIGER DELTA REGION, CA. THIRTEENTH CENTURY CE**

This contorted figure, which is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, displays on its back a pattern of bumps and pocks that might be read as an indication of disease or, alternately, of sacrifice. If we accept this dual reading, the terra-cotta object seems to represent the dynamic between an individual's self-governed will and his consignment to a world of determinism.



Seated figure, Inland Niger Delta region, ca. thirteenth century CE, terra-cotta, 10 x 11 3/4 x 9".

**8. ASANTE GOLD WEIGHT, SEEDPOD, GHANA, CA. NINETEENTH–TWENTIETH CENTURY**

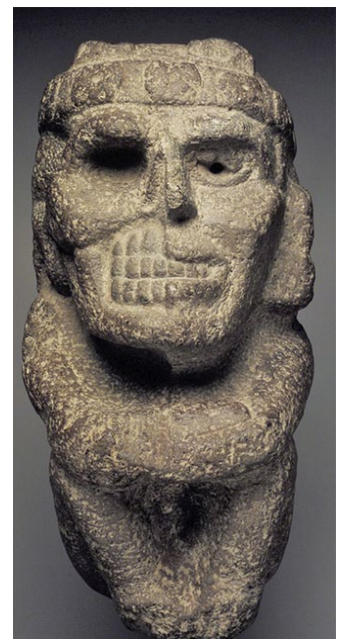
I've been thinking a lot lately about the tension between the delicate quality of seeds and their cheap abundance in postindustrial societies, where hardly anyone needs to grow their own food or foster a healthy plant from sprout to fruit. Long before standardized, cast-metal weights were invented, seeds that were known for their consistent weight, such as those of the *Abrus precatorius*, were used to weigh gold. This piece, also in the Met's collection, beautifully evokes a moment when nature itself paradoxically gave rise to man-made systems of measurement, currency, and exchange, just as it celebrates seedpods as vessels of life.

**9. CYCLADIC IDOL GROUP, ORIGIN UNKNOWN, CA. 2700–2400 BCE**

Cycladic cultural objects often catch my attention for their extreme protomodernist beauty. In this damaged but graceful example of an early idol from the collection of the Badisches Landesmuseum in Karlsruhe, Germany, the neck of a severed torso is carefully embraced by the disarticulated arm of an otherwise-missing second figure. The gesture expresses a sympathy that is only highlighted by the absence; damage enhances meaning.

**10. AZTEC LIFE-DEATH FIGURE, MEXICO, CA. 1200–1521 CE**

My fear of death has fueled much of the anxiety I've experienced as an adult, and so I've become interested in transhumanist attempts to overcome it. I like the Mesoamerican take on the dualism of life and death, which is articulated in this volcanic stone figure from the Brooklyn Museum's collection. Its head is half fleshless skull and half healthy visage; death and life are unified, but they appear to be engaged in a dynamic process, liberated from dichotomies of now and then, either/or.



Aztec Life-Death figure, Mexico, ca. 1200–1521 CE, volcanic stone, 10 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 6 1/8".