

Sculptures & other talk

Lena Henke & Liza Prins

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LP: I am really interested in your strong identification as a sculptor and the production as sculpture you mentioned. I am not sure how you experience this, but I often get the feeling that artistic practices have become more and more performative, introducing a new kind of exploitation of artists that moves parallel to changes that cognitive capitalism has introduced. Can you tell me more about why you chose/grew to be a sculptor, and if you ever think about these things: how do you protect yourself and work from commodification/How do you think a focus on sculpture relates to late capitalism's methods of exploitation/Could this focus be a protective mechanism?

LH: Why art is a good question: Some people react to their surroundings, I was originally trained to be a plant developer. That training resolved around developing stronger plants who react to their surroundings in a different way than expected. After years of education I decided against a so called nine to five job. I always had an independent streak that I wasn't acting on, and needed to ditch that stability and find my own voice in an art school setting. But what I've found as I've aged, is that my practice does in certain ways come back to that initial education. I am developing my own plants.

So why sculpture? It is about that desire in making decisions, and seeing how those decisions run up against their confinements. I'm particularly susceptible to the physicality of architecture and spatial relations, and I'm interested in making work that explores that field. I think that is why sculpture. I'm not interested in being there myself, or having others there in my as stand-ins. I think that's why I've never been interested in pursuing performance on a personal level. I prefer to labor in private, and then present the products and process of my work once I decide it is ready to be seen. I like to leave the planning and working process in the work, because it is part of the work. "An Idea for Late German Sculpture, To The People Of New York, 2018" is a good example for that. The show centered around themes relating to the human, sculptors, fingerprints and their centrality to the final object. The sculptures were produced in pairs, each a copy or clones of each other. My intention was to use the institution, in that case the Kunsthalle Zurich, as an archive, to store works in the exhibition. The pre-work process of sketching and ideating is generative for me as much as the post-work process is. I'm shifting more and more into this staging of the "afterlife" of the image. I think that is why I'm so centered on storage devices in my work, which is where 99.9% of art ends up anyways. There's comfort in confronting the finality.

LP: I love the idea of a "feminized way of sculpture production", can you elaborate on it a bit? How is it different in your eyes from a masculine way of sculpture production? Is it, and if yes why is it, important develop feminine ways? And in addition, are mother molds a feminine way of sculpture production? How are they feminine/ really basic: how do they work?

LH: Having the possibility to bear new life produces questions and anxiety. Being a female, somewhat classical sculptor, dependent on my body, my own physical strength, made me start working with the topics of female casting or casting as birth giving. An example is the piece, The "UR Mutter". A large purple female boar, carved in styrofoam, initially only meant to be used to cast off of there, stood out to me while making it as a stand-in for all sorts of invisible female labor. There is so much in the process of sculpture that we overlook, that is supposed to be the invisible support for the final product, the woman behind the great man as it were. I'm interested in bringing that background to the foreground. I titled the resulting cast off of "Ur Mutter" "die Tochter", which means the daughter in German. And sometimes I wish to be a man, just because to be able to have both, the career and the family. It's still a taboo topic. But the realities of being a female artist in your 30s can't be ignored or wished away, we have to confront it.

LP: Next question, very blunt one: what are you working on at the moment? What themes, materials, forms keep you busy and more specifically do you already have plans for the work you'll be showing in Lustwarande?

LH: Next year it will be 10 years since I graduated from the Frankfurt Staedelschool, and I'm preparing a large overview publication for it. 2010-2020. I'm taking a break from my active production in the studio and looking back onto my work. How it has changed, developed over the years. It will be built around the relation in my work towards several systems in architecture and urban atmospheres. Visible throughout a variety of series of works, structured in related groupings around each topic. There will be a chronological momentum in it too, galleries like that very much but I'm thinking in larger systems here. The discrepancy in how I perceived of what I was doing in the moment versus how I perceive it now will be also be a point of tension. --- I'm bringing my two aluminium Eye shaped sculptures to the fantastic garden "Lustwandere" in Tillburg. A pair of gigantic eyes, that are open at the top. They are surrealistic, yet very minimal looking pieces. There will be sand but I don't want to say too much, we are in the middle of planning the details.

LP: Your practice might come across as a sculptural one, but a closer look reveals that there is a very social dimension to your work as well, I am thinking here of socio-historical context of 'Heartbreak Highway' for example. Can you reflect on the interaction between the sculptural aesthetic language you use and the other dimensions you want to talk about?

LH: I certainly consider myself a sculptor, more so now than I did when I was younger. There are so many entry points from time-worn sculptural techniques that allow me to analyze and explore how people used to live, or allow me to explore how large-scale urban planning psychologically impacts its inhabitants. There is so much space within sculpture to fixate on what fascinates me. The intersection between architectural systems and the body is a recurring motif of mine that I don't think I'll ever move past. This fixation historically links me to a number of my predecessors and serves as wellspring of material that I draw from.

LP: The installation-like presentation methods you employ very much seem to make the spectator part of the work (which could be read as a comment on the more static/autonomous character of modernist sculptures). Do you consider your work performative and what is important for you when thinking about presentation methods?

LH: I wouldn't call it performance but indeed, the presentation is always considered in my shows. I like to activate the physical space, sometimes as a "substitute for a public square", to use Rosalind Krauss' words (*Sculpture in the Expanded field*, 1979), and sometimes the actual public space becomes the final exhibition space. Like in a show I arranged in parking lot underneath an Highway in NYC. I don't believe in neutral presentation settings. Art is making decisions. So every presentation choice is a decision. With that in mind, I love what Fabrice Stroun wrote in the press-text for my solo show at the Kunsthalle Zurich in 2018: "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 up the chainmail will tear in the course of the exhibition, bringing its motion to a grinding halt to become its own programmed ruin.

LP: In addition to the former question: The installation-format has a lot in common with architecture. How does your work relate to that?

LH: When I use the architecture of the exhibition space it becomes automatically a piece "for" the show. I'm explicitly Not saying "in" the show. Usually it's a good start to do that and then to take it from there. For my last show at Bortolami called "Germanic Artifacts" for instance, I needed to go against the masculinity of the space, building an inverted wall brining a larger horizontal surface into the space, with which I then worked. A whole series of works then got adapted and I used the cast iron cast columns as presentation surface, reflecting my interest of architectural shelters from the Germanic tribe ca 300BC as well as thinking of a transformative states in sculpture. In my show at Schirn in Frankfurt, I also needed to respond to the rotunda of the central hall. Architecture is never a given, it also doing different things to its inhabitants. It is important to call attention to this architectural pushiness.

LP: Quite a few of your recent your works contain references to or form a comment on the work sculptors and architects from former era's, 'Yes, I'm Pregnant' for example does that quite literally by incorporating actual sculptures (most importantly the horse by Paul Derkes). Can you reflect on the referential aspects in your work?

LH: All pieces in that photo love story were borrowed from the excellent, but also deeply personal collection from the Glaskasten Museum in Marl, Germany. The horse sculpture by Paul Derkes was a glitch in the collection. It was designed to decorate a actual horse stable, the former Director of the museum was a horse fan like me, and somehow the piece ended up in the storage of the museum. I used it for my 'teenager love story' and it plays the boyfriend of 'Marina' the most important piece in my publication. A Marino Marina sculpture, a beautiful bronze called "The dancer" which I transformed into 'Marina' acted out the main roles in my city/pregnancy story. So I'm heavily invested in using valuable sculptural creations from the last century to describe contemporary issues. Past works become our foundational reference points, the structures that we can push off against.

LP: In addition to the former question: I had the feeling that a lot of the references you use are older (white) male artists or architects. Is your work a feminist comment/re-reading in some way?

LH: Luckily, as times passes, I will be able to use more of my own gendered peers to reference.

LP: A frieze article speaks about you as a “casting agent”. I thought this was interesting in relation to the sort of new cocktails you make with historical information and inspirational factors. Can you elaborate on that role of casting agent and how it might be different from other (older) ideas of artistic authority. Is it related to re-appropriation as well or it it something else?

LH: I’m interested in a “feminized way of sculpture production” and production as sculpture. In particular, a renewed emphasis on casting and what is possible with “mother-molds”. ...

Lena Henke in conversation with Liza Prins (artist and researcher based in Amsterdam), June 2019