

Casting Call

LENA HENKE's sculptures propose new manners of dwelling and co-existence *by Laura McLean-Ferris*



WHEN A GARMENT — LET'S SAY A SHIRT — seems to overpower a person, the insult goes: 'That shirt is wearing you.' This light put-down describes a struggle for presence between the wearer and the worn. But what other objects are wearing you, dominating you, casting you to work for them? The sculptures of New York-based German artist Lena Henke are typified by an apprehension of site and occupancy and the quiet tug-of-war between personality and control. Ranging from table-top models of cities and buildings through human-scale sculptures to larger architectural interventions in public space, Henke's work proposes a built environment that might suit her better.

The artist displays a particular fondness for outdoor sculpture, the history of urban planning and natural-artificial features such as the grotto. She wrangles with the materials, designs, palette and tools that construct our fabricated environment, employing them to suggest other possibilities. Why do we have to live in a world that looks and feels like this one? It's a question Henke has explored most directly in relation to the city of New York, where she relocated after completing her studies at the Städelschule in Frankfurt. Coincidentally, she arrived in the city at the same time as I did, in 2013. I've never perceived anywhere as completely fabricated as New York: whenever I walk near the intersection of Broadway and Lafayette Avenue, the landscape reminds me of a film set, an entirely constructed surface with shallow roots, populated by character actors.

In her recent works, Henke has taken on New York by placing her own body in direct relation to its urban structures, playing with the relative scales of bodies and buildings and evincing psychological turf wars between the city and the self. In a series of sculptures titled 'Female Fatigue' (2015), pared-down metal models representing landmark Manhattan buildings — such as the Chelsea Hotel (*Your Chelsea Hotel*) and the New Museum (*Their New Museum*) — are occupied by moulded-sand sculptures of reclining, statuesque women, outsized in relation to their environments so that they take up around half the floor-space. Though this is certainly a kind of battle for occupation, the large bodies are not positioned aggressively, as in the sci-fi film *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958), but in restful belonging. Titles such as *My Crane Collapse on 57th Street* (2015) also humorously hint at the way New Yorkers colloquially claim sites through naturalizing language: *my deli*, *my UPS guy*, *my subway stop*. Elsewhere, Henke has entirely redrawn the city as an unstable psychogeography, re-organizing its landmarks around her own memories, fantasies and propositional works. The map *Dead Horse Bay* (2015) reconfigures New York as a horse's head, in which the 'Female Fatigue' buildings loom larger than life on the landscape. The screaming head of *Orcus* (Ogre, c.1550), a cave-like stone sculpture by Simone Moschino from the Pirro Ligorio-designed Gardens of Bomarzo in Italy, has been transplanted to Harlem, as an open hellmouth into the city. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is, in Henke's vision, installed close to the Chelsea Piers. For the artist's 2016 solo exhibition at Kunstverein Braunschweig, she showed the related bronze sculpture, *City Lights (Dead Horse Bay)* (2016), transforming the map into an architectural model. Miniature versions of earlier works appear in the piece, including one of the full-sized water tower that she created for her 2016 exhibition at SALTS, Birsfelden: 'My History of Flow'.

The surrealist and mannerist histories in Henke's sculptures suggest a psychological treatment of architecture and space. Yet, if the bodies in this work are the repressed returning, they come back with a gently subversive attitude — for example, in the form of a lone female breast. Soft hills of sculpted-sand breasts were installed around



OPPOSITE PAGE
'Heartbreak Highway',
2016, installation
views, Real Fine Arts,
New York. Courtesy:
the artist and
Bortolami, New York;
photograph:
Joerg Lohse

THIS PAGE ABOVE
Golden Ages, 2017.
Courtesy: the artist
and Galerie Emanuel
Layr, Vienna/Rome;
photograph:
Maximilian
Anelli-Monti

THIS PAGE BELOW
Boob (detail), 2017,
sand, resin, steel,
dimensions variable.
Courtesy: the artist
and Bortolami,
New York



a private garden in Basel in 2017 for Henke's contribution to the Art Basel Parcours programme, together with industrial sandbags from which the moulded shapes of female body parts – legs, breasts and buttocks – emerged. There is an undercurrent of violence in these sculptures of female bodies in bags. But breasts summon softness, warmth and nourishment, too: the generous shape can seem gently witty, especially in isolation (*Boob*, 2017), or highly sexualized. The sand breasts, delicate as sandcastles, are often exhibited with their moulds, such as in the 'Milkdrunk' series (2017), in which various coloured casts are hung on the wall, bound with rubber bands, conferring a sadomasochistic quality. While the moulds suggest a potentially endless supply of breasts – a production line of female body parts – this interpretation is complicated by its associations with the intimacies of childbirth and feeding.

For a competition to propose a large sculpture for the High Line in New York last year, Henke submitted a design for a towering, sculpted-sand breast that, vulnerable to the weather, would require constant remaking and maintenance. The High Line, a former train line turned park, was originally designed by Robert Moses, the legendary New York City planner immortalized in Robert Caro's biography *The Power Broker* (1974). Moses took a radical approach, carving up the city, as he himself put it, with a 'meat axe', in order to build his bridges, tunnels and parks. The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (BQE), close to Henke's studio, is also the work of Moses: an aggressive line sliced out of the city that upsets the logic of the pedestrian neighbourhood beneath in order to allow cars to speed overhead. Moses acts as a simultaneous icon and nemesis for the artist: in

“If the bodies in Henke’s work are the repressed returning, they come back with a gently subversive attitude.”



some ways, Henke's ambitions for sculpture aspire to the work of the radical planner; yet, her practice also critiques his brutal approach. New York was shaped by men like Moses, and the construction of roads, bridges and big buildings – which influence movement, behaviour and consciousness – has, so far, been mostly the work of men. Henke's breast sculptures appear as objects of desublimation: the return of soft, protective forms that have been suppressed in the building of the city.

For a 2016 exhibition at Real Fine Arts in New York, 'Heartbreak Highway', Henke dedicated small sculptural doll houses in the shape of horses' hooves to the former inhabitants of the area who had been displaced by the BQE. Henke placed these works on Lazy Susans, which were treated like dining tables. The installation map for the exhibition showed a different person's name every 90 degrees: an imagined family from a former world sitting down to dinner. The horse-hoof houses, another surrealist part-object, make reference to Dead Horse Bay, an area of South Brooklyn where the bones of dead carriage horses would be ground and boiled down to make glue. Today, the beach is known for the mid-century trash that still washes up there, leaking from Moses's sand and rubbish landfill to connect a small landmass, named Barren Island, to the rest of Brooklyn. Henke collected some of the old glass jars and bottles that had washed up on the shore of Dead Horse Bay and built houses out of cardboard for those, too. As the clinking of antique glass jars can be heard on the seashore, the dead return as bodies, hooves, breasts and effluvia.

More recently, the artist's reconstitution of objects as bodies within her own narrative universe can be thought of in relation to the work of Giorgio de Chirico, echoing his approach to living in the world 'as in an immense museum of strange things'. De Chirico often painted human bodies as though they were assembled from architectural elements, wearing parts of the city like garments: in *The Painter's Family* (1926), for example, a neoclassical arch supports the heart while skyscrapers burst forth from the solar plexus. Henke drives such formal concerns through an attentiveness to late modern sculpture, which she playfully appropriates. Like De Chirico, Henke has created abstracted portraits of her family and others using sculptural objects and architectural elements. In 'Yes, I'm Pregnant' – an exhibition and comic-book publication, shown at Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten Marl in 2014 – Henke shot a teen 'photo love story' using outdoor sculptures by artists including Hans Arp, Paul Derkes and Marino Marini. The plot featured a young girl (a sculpture of a woman by Marini) who falls in love with Paul (a bronze horse by Derkes) and becomes pregnant. Removed from their pedestals, these sculptures by noted male artists are dragged into the sphere of teenage romance. The comic strip was accompanied by a selection of smaller sculptures from the museum's collection, including works by Ewald Mataré and Eduardo Paolozzi, chosen to represent members of the artist's family. These were installed according to the psycho-spatial principles of German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger's family constellations



ALL IMAGES THIS SPREAD
 'An Idea of Late
 German Sculpture; To the
 People of New York', 2018,
 exhibition views, Kunsthalle
 Zürich. Courtesy: the artist,
 Bortolami, New York, Galerie
 Emanuel Layr, Vienna/Rome,
 and Kunsthalle Zürich;
 photograph: Gunnar Meier



*“Henke’s work asks:
why do we have
to live in a world that looks
and feels like this one?”*

therapeutic method. In both these works, Henke asserts her authority to act as a casting agent. The term ‘casting’ has its origins in sculpture, referring to the creation of a form using a mould. Henke’s work in casting and recasting is to reform through character.

For the artist’s current solo show at Kunsthalle Zürich, purple silicone copies of the family sculptures originally exhibited at the Sprengel Museum Hannover (*The Coming*, 2017) were left out in the sunlight to bleach. In Zürich, these faded icons occupy indoor shelves designed to suggest architectural bodies in the style of De Chirico. The biggest work on display is a kinetic sculpture that, replicating the movements of heavy construction machinery, sets in motion a number of large fibreglass sculptures. These are amalgams of Henke’s own sculptural forms as well as those of architects, urban designers and artists including Moses, Robert Morris and Aldo Rossi. A horse’s hoof, a sleeping elephant and an ‘endless knee’ – echoing the shape of a woman’s crossed legs – are covered in the kind of rubber granulates used to surface tennis courts. Henke, considering the Kunsthalle as a total machine, has installed a mechanized pulley system in the walls of the exhibition space, which drags chainmail over the sculptures. Abrasive and damaging, the movement causes some of the works to be pulled across the floor, while a second shelf of doubles, or ‘extras’, awaits its turn. Reappropriating the title of Blinky Palermo’s 1976 series, ‘To the People of New York City’, Henke’s exhibition, ‘An Idea of Late German Sculpture: To the People of New York’, adroitly unites the artist’s reconstitution of the European sculpture garden with her interest in the psycho-surreal damage wrought on individuals in her adopted city, where the armour of character acts as an everyday costume. As if transporting the shapes of the city’s subconscious from subterranean to the everyday, the show aims to desubliminate fantasies, cruelties and delirium, and observe them at ground level. ●



ABOVE
City Lights
(*Dead Horse Bay*), 2016,
bronze and painted
wood, 105 × 125 × 65 cm.
Courtesy: the artist
and Bortolami,
New York; photograph:
© Stefan Stark

LEFT
‘Heartbreak Highway’,
2016, installation view,
Real Fine Arts,
New York. Courtesy:
the artist
and Bortolami,
New York; photograph:
Joerg Lohse

LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS is a writer and curator at Swiss Institute, New York, USA.

LENA HENKE is an artist based in New York, USA. Her solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland, is on view until 13 May, and her work will be on display as part of KölnSkulptur 9, Cologne, Germany, until June 2019. Last year, she had a solo show at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany, and her work was also included in ‘Produktion: Made in Germany Drei’ at Kunstverein Hannover, Germany, and the Biennale de Montréal, Canada.