



Ayşe Erkmen's *Endless Knee*, 2018. Plaster, fiberglass, rubber, paint. 165 × 165 × 165 cm.
Vulnerable in the Moment of Control, 2018. Detail. Chainmail, cord, steel wire, motor. 600 × 1200 cm. Photography by Gunnar Meier.
 Courtesy of the artist; Bortolami, New York; and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna / Rome.

"An Idea of Late German Sculpture; To the People of New York, 2018," installation view at Kunsthalle Zurich, 2018. Photography by Gunnar Meier.
 Courtesy of the artist; Bortolami, New York; and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna / Rome.

In the artist's words, they are made "to play a new role in history," one that situates the object in a looping trajectory between its production and reception. In this interview, Henke talks with Tenzing Barshee about her concerns with notions of materiality and ephemerality, the search for the intimate dimension of urban space, and the exhausted representational function of sculpture.

Tenzing Barshee: In your recent exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich – "An Idea of Late German Sculpture; To the People of New York, 2018" – you presented an updated version of an older work (*Geburt und Familie*, 2014) in which you superimposed the facial features of your family members onto canonical modern sculptures. Originally, you had them photographed in an empty pool in front of the Skulpturenmuseum in Marl, gesturing at the desolate financial situation of the institution, as well as the postindustrial socioeconomic situation of the German provincial region. How did you update this piece?

Lena Henke: I remodeled the faces of my family members, but I also reconfigured the "family constellation" of the work, so that each sculpture-relative of mine is in new correspondence with

the others, since relationships change over time. For the show, I also wanted to have an older work, installed on the only freestanding wall, which is right in the middle of the room. On one side of the gigantic wall, the original 2014 drawing, also titled *Geburt und Familie*, is installed. On the other side, the new family constellation (*Die Kommenden*, 2017) stretches along the entirety of the wall's nine-meter length.

The sculptural figures are DIY casts from the works of my twentieth-century idols, like Ewald Mataré, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Wilhelm Lehmbrock. It was calming not only to work with familiar faces – those of my family – but with art pieces that were familiar to me as well.

How else has the work changed from its earlier iteration, and how does the new "family constellation" manifest itself?

In an earlier show at the Sprengel Museum, Hannover, the heads were exposed to the outdoors, so the sun bubbled up their surface and bleached out their deep purple color – which came from last year's Balenciaga collection. It's a family portrait so it's not perfect. Functioning, but not in a full sense. What's more important, the sculptures sit on shelving elements now. Columns, arches, and bridges

seem to have grown out of the wall, holding heads in new positions. I built a wall display inspired by Giorgio de Chirico's ideas of painting humans as architectural elements. The painting I used as a guideline is called *The Archaeologists* from 1927.

What was the general idea for your exhibition at Kunsthalle Zurich?

For the show, I was questioning how each sculpture exists in space, and how each draws attention to its environment. I explored their limitations and was curious how the works address their own conditions. Three pairs of large-scale sculptures (*Aldo Rossi's Sleeping Elephant*, *Robert Moses Mother Drives Through Wallis*, *Ayşe Erkmen's Endless Knee*, all 2018) were situated in a state of waiting – waiting to get used, outdoors for instance, as public art, made to withstand all weather conditions; or waiting to be rolled around, covered with a soft tennis-court rubber surface, able to absorb impact. One piece sits on a large storage shelf, waiting to get into the "supply line." To begin with, I hand-built a set of smaller models in unfired clay. Out of this batch, I selected three prototypes to be digitally blown up into two identical objects. Relating their size to Le Corbusier's idea of Modulor, I opposed those larger works with a scaled,

68



Geburt und Familie, 2014. Pencil on paper. 45×33 cm
Photography by Gunnar Meier.
Courtesy of the artist

69

head-size version of the family portrait we talked about earlier. The room got divided by those two different-sized works; but also by a very large floor installation (*Vulnerable in the Moment of Control*, 2018) made out of chain mail and moving forth and back on the floor, between the walls of the room, every half an hour, like an incoming train. The idea for the show stems from my thinking about the labor of industrial machines, which are usually designed to move things around – or to build architecture. The walls of the institution became the machine and the sculptures itself were like "sculptural stand-ins." The chain mail, at some point, fell apart due to the steady movement. The sculptures describe a state "before" or "after"



– the show, for instance – like the production itself or the storage afterwards. I was thinking about the archival function of institutions. Each piece exists twice, an exact clone of the original work. Each sculptural pair referred formally to early works but its shape evokes more a mechanical tool instead of an architecture. Rosalind Krauss said that modern sculpture absorbed its base. Maybe postmodern sculpture is *nothing* but its base, like Piero Manzoni's *Socle du Monde* (1961). So, to open the space around the sculpture and let it mesh with its surroundings is

something I'm interested in at this moment, which neither adheres to the standard modern or postmodern expectations of sculpture.

Talk more about your interest in using existing sculptures and directly referencing art history.

It started with the show that I did at the Skulpturenmuseum in Marl, one of the last mining cities in Germany. The museum, which houses significant works by Alberto Giacometti, Isa Genzken, and Alice Aycock, was built by the architects Broekbakema. There's a lot of amazing mid-twentieth-century architecture around the town. For instance, the shopping mall has a unique, air-cushioned roof

in history, to play a new character. I'm afraid of becoming pregnant or, at least, I used to be earlier in my life. I was an accident myself, and my mother had me when she was very young. Fertility, pregnancy, and birth are some of the oldest subjects in art. *Yes, I'm Pregnant* taps into these issues without coming to a conclusion.

Where do you place yourself in the narrative of modern art and the discourses that critique it?

I'd like to be personal in my work, to create tension between power and vulnerability. The genealogy that emerges within my work is something which I let happen naturally. It's an unconscious decision, part of my

that gives an appearance of a UFO. There's also a primary school built by Hans Scharoun in the 1970s, that embodies radical and humane ideas about architecture's potential to shape social interactions. The town's wealth – which stemmed from industrial resources – has been crumbling, which led to the link between modernity and "failure" in that show. For the show, I made a comic book – *Yes, I'm Pregnant* (2014) – that deals with a teenage pregnancy: a Marino Marini sculpture gets knocked up by a horse sculpture by Paul Dierkes. I'm "casting" sculpture to play a new role

own history, which I sometimes push, squeeze, or deny. And oftentimes, you only see in retrospect what things have connected. History is the raw material I draw upon, which began when I had access to a collection of mostly twentieth-century sculpture while working a student art job in Frankfurt. Works which are deeply personal touch me. As Rainer Werner Fassbinder said, "The more honestly you put yourself into the story, the more that story will concern others as well." But then there is also the other story that draws from the city I live in, New York – the ultimate modern city. I like to explore

Die Kommenden, 2017. Silicon rubber, foam, pigment. Dimensions variable.
Installation view at Kunsthalle Zurich, 2018. Photography by Gunnar Meier.
Courtesy of the artist; Bortolami, New York; and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna / Rome.

the intimate space of urban space, to build on it as if it is a material that I can make malleable and shape. It feels almost like a fantasy to me. It triggers my imagination and allows me to fold my personal history within, to imbue it with meanings.

But let's zoom out of the grid of the city for a moment and hover above for a while, enjoying the bird's-eye view, only to zoom in again, and this time, get very close, touching base with the white space of a gallery or a museum. I am always thinking about how to shift the physical momentum of the viewer's eyes. As of now, I try to guide the gaze away from the typical or traditional ways of viewing things in art spaces. By using tools like scaling, water, or even stepping stones in sculptural installations, I'm offering a variable to the visitor, giving hints or alternative routes on how to navigate through my space. I'm interested in movement, weight, dimensions, and the connections to the ground. This brings me from the white cube to the outdoors and now, more and more, to public spaces. I seek to create an interchangeable landscape where the relationship between the viewer and the physical foundation of urbanism becomes increasingly visible; where the interruption of the process itself is usually needed to introduce new standards; and where the artworks need to unfold slowly over time in real space and to which the audience needs to keep their attention, stay focused. I look for the possibility to prod us toward an understanding for the framework that conditions our experience of art.

You've repeatedly used sand in your work, which produces quite fragile sculptures. At the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt you spread sand over different levels of the institution, which was kicked down or carried away by visitors stepping into it (*Schrei mich nicht an, Krieger!* [Don't Shout at Me, Warrior!, 2017]). I understand your use of sand as questioning the stability of sculpture and its temporality. Sand is also used in the making of bronze sculpture. What is it about sand that intrigues you?

Sand gives me freedom to work with what I call a surreal way of making sculpture. My work is pure material, and ephemeral in a way. The relation between the material/sculpture and the environment in the show at the Schirn Kunsthalle was constantly changing through movements caused both by gravity and the visitor. Negative space became positive: sand is omnipresent; you will always find a sand grain in your pocket. At the same time, sand as a

material is high-demand. It's the building staple of civilizations both modern and ancient. And even if sand is an infinite resource, people are constantly mining it, fighting for it. It's in every building and in all glass panels. It's very New York. However, it's not lasting, as my sculptures are not lasting, but you can remake them because they come with their custom-made cast. At the Kunsthalle Zurich exhibition, every sculpture exists twice in the space: an exact copy of the first one is on display, ready to get picked up from the storage shelf in the exhibition – an endless supply of sculpture.

You've talked about the importance of public sculpture and access to art in general. Have you worked on any public sculpture?

Last year I proposed a sculpture that would occupy the High Line in New York (*Ascent of a Woman*, 2016) and take the space itself as a point of departure. It would have had the form of a singular, gigantic upturned breast, entirely sculpted from sand. The visible outer layer would slowly erode and morph at the mercy of the weather. The High Line was once the lifeline of New York City, transporting goods – meat, produce, milk, and more – into Manhattan. It embodies this notion of a "lifeline" as well as recalling the legend of the founding of Rome. This public sculpture builds upon my "Female Fatigue" series (2015–ongoing), continuing my exploration of urban space, the depiction and abstraction of the female body, and shows how these topics overlap. Where the "Female Fatigue" series placed mental projections of the architecture of New York City in dialogue with the female body, the sand breast further blurs the relationship between the two, presenting the city and the body in a surreal entanglement with one another. I hope that my sculptures will draw some kind of attention to how their materiality exists in relation to the environment.

I've always admired some of your early projects, especially the series "First Ladies" (2011).

I did that series during the time when Michelle Obama would show her upper arms and everybody would ceaselessly comment on it. I did seven sculptures, each of the first ladies from different countries, in which I explored the themes of girl power, high-class party and style culture that were distinct to each of these women's circumstances. I used feminist humor to hackle around the age-old question of representational

sculpture on a pedestal. It was my very first solo show, in a small space in the south of Germany.

Then there was your exhibition "Hang Harder" at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein in 2012, which seemed to be reminiscent of Steven Parrino's work. You basically applied tar paper and resin to wooden boards, which you placed on foldable metal chairs. I was always interested in this almost forced casualness, which is paired, and perhaps challenged, by a material complication, a finickiness. I guess this is something that I see in many of your works: a line that can be easily followed until it gets distorted, complicated, and corrupted by one of your artistic gestures.

That was my first institutional show. I used raw material on folding chairs. At that time, I was already thinking about urban materials in relation to the psychospace, the so-called "third place."

Have you acquired a repertoire of gestures, ideas, or material results that you can recurrently rearrange? Or do you feel a drive to reinvent those previously learned ways of making work?

I certainly do, but it's hard to articulate them discreetly.

TENZING BARSHEE is an independent writer and curator at Sundogs, Paris.



First Ladies, 2009.
Exhibition view at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2011.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna / Rome.