

TEXTS BY ATIF AKIN, JOAN ANIM-ADDO, MAGALÍ ARRIOLA, RAKHEE BALARAM, ERIKA BALSOM, UTE META BAUER, BETTINA BRUNNER, D. GRAHAM BURNETT, PATRICK CHARPÉNEL, DAMIAN CHRISTINGER, SEBASTIAN CICHOCKI, CM LIVE (NEELOFAR, SURAJ RAI, AND SHAMSHER ALI), GABRIELLE CRAM, HEATHER DAVIS, ANGELA DIMITRAKAKI, GEORGES B.J. DREYFUS, EVA EBERSBERGER, CHARLES ESCHÉ, BEATRICE FORCHINI, ANSELM FRANKE, NATASHA GINWALA, DAVID GRUBER, CARLES GUERRA, SOLEDAD GUTIÉRREZ, NAV HAQ, EVA HAYWARD, STEFAN HELMREICH, STEFANIE HESSLER, VÁCLAV JANOŠČÍK, CAROLINE A. JONES, RUBA KATRIB, LUTZ KOEPNICK, CRESANTIA FRANCES KOYA VAKA'UTA, LUCA LO PINTO, SARAT MAHARAJ, CHUS MARTÍNEZ, MARGARIDA MENDES, SUZANA MILEVSKA, VANESSA JOAN MÜLLER, HEIKE MUNDER, SARA NADAL-MELSIÓ, HENNING NASS, ASTRIDA NEIMANIS, INGO NIERMANN, SANDRA NOETH, HANS ULRICH OBRIST, BORIS ONDREIČKA, ANNIE PAUL, NATAŠA PETREŠIN-BACHELEZ, IGNAS PETRONIS, ELIZABETH A. POVINELLI, FILIPA RAMOS, RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE, MARKUS REYMANN, KATHRIN RHOMBERG, DAN RICHARDS, RIDYKEULOUS (NICOLE EISENMAN + A.L. STEINER), RALPH RUGOFF, THIBAUT DE RUYTER, NADIM SAMMAN, MIRJAM SCHAUB, ANDREAS SCHLAEGEL, CORY SCOZZARI, TSERING SHAKYA, CHRIS SHARP, JASPER SHARP, FREDERIKE SPERLING, ANDREAS SPIEGL, FRANCESCA THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA, EMILIANO VALDÉS, NICOLA VASSELL, FRANZISKA SOPHIE WILDFÖRSTER, EVA WILSON, SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, DANIELA ZYMAN, OONA ZYMAN

Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary The Commissions Book

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The Commissions Book

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Isa Genzken

EMPIRE VAMPIRE III, 19, 2004

PLASTIC, METAL, GLASS, FABRIC, LACQUER, PAPER, WOOD
320 × 100 × 75 CM

WIND (MICHAEL), 2009

COPPERPLATES, ALUMINUMPLATES, COLOR COPIES, TAPE, SPRAY PAINT
260.5 × 315 CM

NEW BUILDINGS FOR BERLIN VI, 2013

GLASS, EPOXY RESIN, SILICON, LACQUERED MDF
GLASS: 83 × 47 × 32 CM
PLATE: 60 × 45 × 1 CM
PLINTH: 139 × 40 × 30 CM

BORN IN BAD OLDESLOE, GERMANY, IN 1948.
LIVES IN BERLIN, GERMANY.

ANTAGONISM AS FORM
VANESSA JOAN MÜLLER

“Only the skyscrapers currently under construction demonstrate the really bold constructional ideas,”¹ claimed Ludwig Mies van der Rohe of his design for a glass skyscraper next to the Friedrichstrasse rail terminal in Berlin in 1922. Isa Genzken appears to have taken a leaf out of his book for her *New Buildings for Berlin*, in as much as she uses colored glass and lacquered MDF to create towering, sculptural formations that refer to the architecture of modernity with its visionary and social agenda, but at the same time reclaim sculpture beyond the realm of representationality. Her *New Buildings for Berlin* are at once light, fragile structures recalling the kind of sketches made by modernist architects, contrasting abstract configurations with the disillusioning capital-city grandeur of Berlin’s new architecture,² in which van der Rohe’s irrepressibly expressive verticality coalesces with the crystalline aesthetics of Bruno Taut’s fantasies in glass. The idea of architecture as a visible expression of history and our contemporary world plays an important role in Genzken’s work, which combines the constructional moment with the motif of the model. Models are to be understood here as a visualization of something that does not (yet) exist as an illustrative representation of an abstract construct. They are miniaturized designs of the real world that lend ideas a provisional shape as a test case for reality. Genzken’s oeuvre, as sculpturally modulated as it is in its various guises, almost always has—in its ambivalent oscillation between form striving for autonomy and material rich in associations—something model-like about it that addresses another, different level over and above its status as an object, whether it is understood allusively as an invocation of templates from the architecture of art or as a reference to the fundamental social component of everything built and constructed. Genzken’s *New Buildings for Berlin* once again harness the vernacular of modernism characteristic of her earlier work, ranging from her *Hyperbolos* via works in concrete all the way to her stelae. Standing on a high pedestal, which affords the viewer a glimpse of the glass structure, a work such as *Berlin IV* (2013) recalls architectural designs that envision a metropolitan urban landscape beyond the real concrete deserts of the German capital. Through the use of strips of glass and garishly painted MDF boards leaning against one another to such an extent that they appear to defy gravity, Genzken not only underscores the visual lightness of the sculpture, but also emphasizes it as an explicit antagonism to the prevalent construction method—which largely eschews upward expansion—currently dominating Berlin’s new buildings. Resting against one another to form a column, the colored glass strips of *New Buildings for Berlin* celebrate iconic twentieth-century architecture with its desire for an aesthetically

1084

1085

and ideologically different world, lending them the dual status of artwork and commentary. The sculptures suggest apparently utopian scenarios, yet assert their model-like character, which elevates them in turn above their existence as autonomous sculptures while insisting on them as instances of pure designed form. Such a paradox is wholly typical of Genzken who actively processes the formal and conceptual repertoire of Western modernism in her work and who invariably insists upon aesthetic autonomy. At the same time, her works are always present-day commentaries on a consumerist world that has seemingly lost that ideological horizon, the telos of modernity.

Even though *New Buildings for Berlin* differ in their reduced, constructional aesthetic from the opulent and surreally exuberant works of recent years, they share an attitude of confrontation with the excesses of globalized capitalism: for some time now, the beauty of Genzken's works derives primarily from the experience of decay, lived dystopia, and the seemingly ruinous present.

Begun in 2001, the series "Empire Vampire" presents a miscellany of three-dimensional collages combined into assemblages. These diorama-like scenarios comprise various different elements covered with dripped or poured paint that fuse imaginary Hollywood worlds with low-cost decorative items and toys alien to their intended uses. Decay and destruction, as well as an eminently unstable adjunct of reciprocity and antagonism, are the watchwords of these fictional infernos, in which plastic, reflective foil, everyday objects, action figures and consumer goods of negligible value are negated in their status as useful objects. They now inhabit a new context that can best be described as allegorical: as a fragment, a ruin, a scene of devastation, to name a few of the keywords that Walter Benjamin used to indicate constellations that oscillate between allegory and emblematic riddles and posit groups of dissonantly assembled, individual symbols as the embodiment of our contemporary social disposition.

Traces of paint, poured or dripped, come across as yet another alienation effect in Genzken's works, subverting their fundamentally dystopian tone with added color and impeding the legibility of individual elements in favor of overall symbolic import. The works of the "Empire Vampire" series, made in response to the 9/11 terror attacks, the collapse of the World Trade Center and the subsequent "War on Terror," resemble test patterns for imaginary (or also model) disasters. The "Empire Vampire" presents itself as a zone of antagonistic collision that forces disparate entities into a unity. These works have a tendency toward the catastrophic. However, they do not treat these prospective ideas fatalistically, but rather with an expressive attitude that still manages to pull off a degree of artistic elegance in what are effectively repositories for the detritus of affluent society. Genzken's multi-perspective view of the contemporary world fuses the present into new ensembles and, in its repudiation of formal cohesion, also

1086

1087



ISA GENZKEN, *NEW BUILDINGS FOR BERLIN VI*, 2013



LEFT: ISA GENZKEN, **EMPIRE VAMPIRE III**, 19, 2004

RIGHT: ISA GENZKEN, **WIND (MICHAEL)**, 2009

INSTALLATION VIEW, KÜNSTLERHAUS, HALLE FÜR KUNST & MEDIEN, GRAZ, 2014

references the failed aspirations of both modernism and late modernism. The title of the series itself alludes to the Empire's inherently vampiric disposition—that exploitative, hegemonic, and capitalizing world order laid out by Hardt and Negri in their seminal work *Empire*.

What strikes one as fatalistic here is the lightness with which the attack on the symbols of modernity, embodied in the collapsing Empire State Building and concentrated flows of finance, is articulated in the individual works—a precise setting of contrary entities enshrined in simultaneously fragile and monumental structures that reflect imminent collapse as a current condition.

In *Empire Vampire III – 19* (2004), an oversized wine glass acts as a kind of pedestal for a baseball bat wrapped in adhesive tape and thin metal poles with finials shaped like Burgundian lilies, upon which an open pink umbrella rests. A hula-hoop, a transparent plastic net, an artificial butterfly, a miniature cowboy, and Indian action figures battling it out complete the tableau, which, in the symbolic multiplicity of its components, seems as complex as a Baroque still life. The sculpture, comprising budget decorative items, perches on a classical slim white plinth, deliberately ennobling the work and further highlighting its fragility. The potential instability of this unusual combination of found objects also reflects the fundamental instability of human existence in our present dispensation. Genzken's "Empire Vampire" sculptures are avowed anti-monuments in which a mundane, quotidian aesthetic is allegorically condensed into historical tableaux or scenes from a surreal world theater. However, these configurations are arranged rather than staged: even in a seemingly random composition, Genzken proves herself to be a sculptor who knows exactly how to connect formal decisions and the semantic plurality of her unconventional materials in a dialectical manner.

Genzken's works oscillate between "high" and "low," between reference to those exponents of American post-war modernism, whom she repeatedly inserts into her work, and a translation of the classical tropes in sculpture, such as space, material, color, movement, light, reflection, and the use of the most ordinary everyday materials. For example, the serial sequence of copper and aluminum panels of *Wind (Michael)* (2009) evoke the aesthetics of minimalism. However, the cheap color photocopies affixed to this industrial surface and the sprayed horizontal line beneath them subvert this impression. The photocopied images depict Michael Jackson in concert, leaping into the air during a dance routine. The lightness of his movements and the metaphorical wind that sweeps through him and lifts him up from the ground recall the studies of expression by classical sculptors, and yet this snapshot of the icon of pop culture is at best a flawed heroic posture. The rhythmization resulting from the sequence of copper panels and replicated in the double posting of Jackson's image as he dances, however, is left incomplete: the last panel is empty, unadorned. The contrast

between solid metal and fragile paper further singles out the "King of Pop" as the product of an entertainment culture in which adulation and dismantlement are concomitant. The distinctive dance moves of a star like Michael Jackson—whom Genzken regards as the epitome of glamour and the contemporary pop aesthetic—also stand for the immaterial power of the wind, which lends a figurative sculptural vigour to her own work. This resides in a seemingly spontaneous yet, upon closer inspection, extremely sophisticated take on form, an authentic and intuitive handling of materials full of references that do not overlay or mask the formal aspects in spite of their profusion, and an eminently classical sensitivity for a distillation of the present in those very object microcosms that gave rise to them, seemingly ever on the verge of collapse and yet surprisingly stable. For this reason too, Genzken's works are an incisive expression of our time.

1 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Hochhäuser," *Frühlicht*, vol. 1 no. 4 (1922): 122–124.

2 "The worst thing here in regarding architecture is the fact that everything [...] has been made in the lowest architectural style, the absolute lowest." Isa Genzken, "A Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans," in *Isa Genzken* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), 137.