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FUNCTIONALISM

OLGA BALEMA

*Loop:
Substance and
Circumstance*

WORDS BY
ELEANOR IVORY WEBER

Loop: Substance and Circumstance



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Olga Balema by Eleanor Ivory Weber

Repetition is the stuff of everyday life; it's what we do. Even when I'm mixing it up, there's a subjective equation whose result is the same. But accidents happen – slips of the tongue, to say the least – and it is the specific way I at once produce them and respond to them that shapes my life. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, repetition has two forms, borrowed from the ancients: *tuché* and *automaton*.¹ We are bound to *automaton*, which describes an almost endless coming back to the same signs again and again, a kind of senseless loop whose course is predictable once established, determined as it is by the search for its own stability. The other kind of repetition, *tuché* (in which one cannot help reading the comical retort to a point well-made: *touché!*), is a kind of encounter. We could even say a surprise. Having perhaps more to do with contingency, this second repetition is nonetheless a kind of contingency that must be seized.

If sculptures are serial objects in three-dimensions (I'm thinking of technical reproducibility), Olga Balema's oeuvre is exclusively sculptural. The works also call for the vocabulary of installation art in their effect on the surrounding space and dependency upon it. Relying on and transforming context has become a cliché. What serious art hasn't been made aware of its surrounds and its conditions since Minimalism (aka literalism) claimed the space and the viewer's experience alike? A distinction is crucial, though: literalists disdain sculpture — and all composed, figured art — because composition implies a gap, a part of which they are not in control.² In other words, there are two ways to work with the surrounds. The first (literalist) totalizes and seeks to overwhelm, and creates indifference to being looked at through pronounced knowledge about itself; the second (materialist) relates and questions, looking at it creates difference because the work is the residue of a process partially unknown, even to its author.

It is the exception that proves the rule. Balema's practice once included video — she made *Squeeze Through* (2012), which animates Bella's vampire transformation in *Twilight* across five screens — until she found a way to satisfy time and seriality within sculpture itself, notably around the period of her exhibition "What Enters" (2013) at 1646, The Hague. Bits of metal, textile, and other unspecific objects are encased in low-lying transparent PVC rectangles about the size of single mattresses, filled with water and glued shut. The chemical reaction of water and the other contents inhere these works with a kind of dramaturgy, one in which the artist sets the starting point but cannot know exactly what will be visible as time passes.

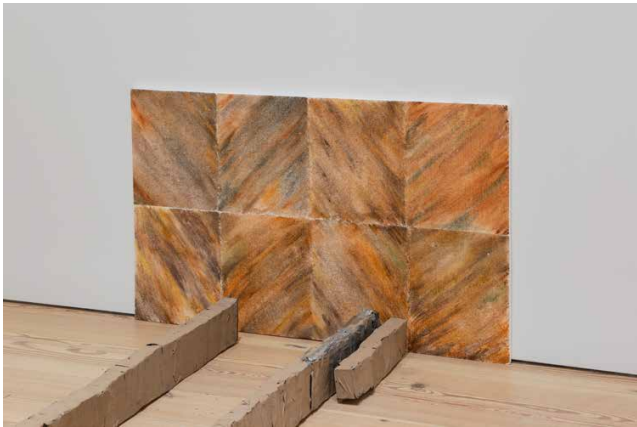
Let's hazard a minimal definition of "time-based" as works for which the components light, movement, and duration are decisive, whatever their technical support. This expands the definition of time-based as a descriptor of all film and audiovisual art to encompass not only performance art but also some sculpture. The late writer and artist Ian White might have gone so far as to call such practices "expanded cinema."³ Without overplaying the use of classical medium distinctions in apprehending visual and plastic arts, positioning a given practice in a field helps to see where the juxtaposition of disciplines does justice to a practice and its transmission, while bearing in mind Joan Copjec's warning that "the perfection of vision and knowledge can only be procured at the expense of invisibility and nonknowledge."⁴ I use categories of knowledge like sculpture, installation, and time-based in order to contend with the fetish for category-busting becoming its own kind of perfect knowledge. This would be the point where all the prefixes for "disciplinary" (inter-, multi-, anti-, un-, etc.) culminate in a refusal to say anything.

It's in this spirit that I say Balema makes sculptures, with the footnote that they contain something of the time-based and that this can be elucidated through the concept of repetition, to be understood in a vacillating manner, at once physical and semblance, necessary and contingent, substantial and circumstantial. In this light, I will mainly focus on two bodies of work, "Loop" (2023–ongoing) and "Brain Damage" (2019), and a selection of the artist's statements, which help construct this argument.

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- 1 Jacques-Alain Miller, ed., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton, 1981).
- 2 I have gone into more detail on this elsewhere. Eleanor Ivory Weber, "Endure This Now: Literalist Art, Performance Art, and the Enigma," *Collateral Journal*, cluster 40a (2024): <https://collateral-journal.com/index.php?cluster=40>.
- 3 Ian White, "Performer, Audience, Mirror: Cinema, Theatre and the Idea of the Live," in *Here Is Information. Mobilise.: Selected Writings by Ian White*, ed. Mike Sperlinger (LUX, 2016), 261.
- 4 Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject," in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Verso, 2015), 17.

Loop: Substance and Circumstance



Olga Balema by Eleanor Ivory Weber



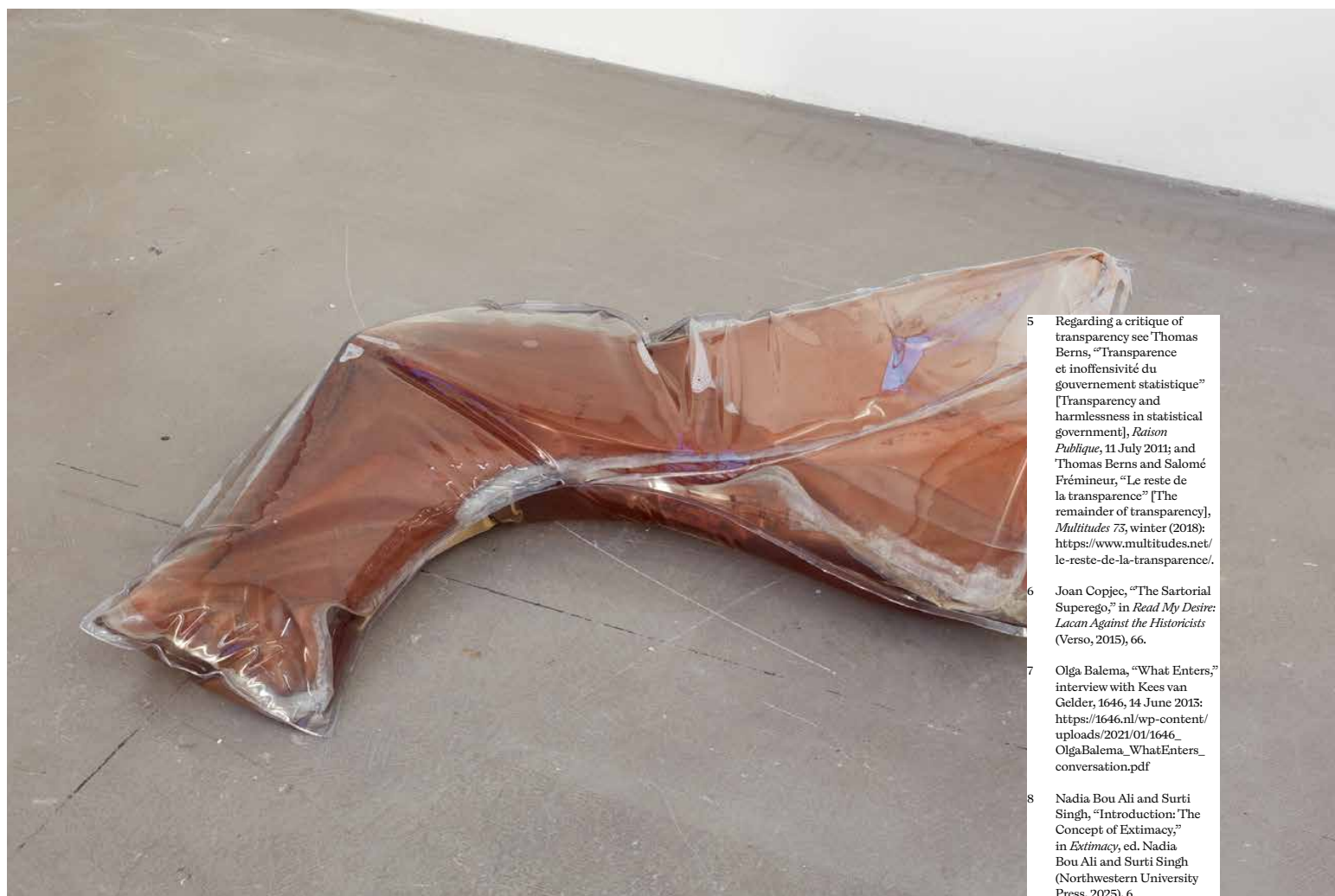
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5 Regarding a critique of transparency see Thomas Berns, "Transparence et inoffensivité du gouvernement statistique" [Transparency and harmlessness in statistical government], *Raison Publique*, 11 July 2011; and Thomas Berns and Salomé Frémineur, "Le reste de la transparence" [The remainder of transparency], *Multitudes* 73, winter (2018): <https://www.multitudes.net/le-reste-de-la-transparence/>.

6 Joan Copjec, "The Sartorial Superego," in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Verso, 2015), 66.

7 Olga Balema, "What Enters," interview with Kees van Gelder, 1646, 14 June 2013: https://1646.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/1646_OlgaBalema_WhatEnters_conversation.pdf

8 Nadia Bou Ali and Surti Singh, "Introduction: The Concept of Extimacy," in *Extimacy*, ed. Nadia Bou Ali and Surti Singh (Northwestern University Press, 2025), 6.

The ongoing series of sculptures called “Loop” began in 2021 without a title and has comprised the majority of Balema’s production since then. These works are comprised of transparent polycarbonate, thin clear plastic, that is folded, bent, cut, and glued — sometimes standing alone, sometimes using a plinth, wall or corner on which to lean. As vessels unable to contain (if filled they would leak), sometimes they seem to billow, sometimes they buckle from their angular edges and corners exerting pressure on the surfaces yet failing to hold them totally straight. Gravity is taken into account and is an agent in their composition, as is the floor itself, which seems to exert upward pressure on their gentle bodies. “Loop” is like a lowest common denominator of sculpture — volume, surface, and gravity — and, as such, resists speaking for sculpture, subtracts rather than adds to it. It is in this sense that we must understand the work’s transparency not via the fantasy, whereby there are no secrets and we might see all as it actually is, as the ideology goes,⁵ but rather exactly as a symbol for our lack of transparency to ourselves.⁶ To that extent, what might be represented by “Loop” is precisely your own looking coming at you from outside.

This is why we could say “Loop” is social. In relation to earlier, untitled water-based sculptures, Balema wrote: “interiors becoming exteriors becoming interiors.”⁷ The latency of repetition and a sense of circular movement mark the poetics of the phrase, touching on the Lacanian concept of “extimacy.” Extimacy refers to the discovery “that what appears to be exterior is actually interior, and what appears to be my most interior self is foreign to me.”⁸ This takes us back to the idea of transparency, and the erroneous equation of transparency with vision, recalling that what is the most intimate to me is, at the same time, the most opaque.

What perhaps goes without saying, but is worth articulating, is that “Loop” reflects everything around it. How it appears changes as you move and as the light moves. If the ground is wooden, concrete or grassy, if the walls are white, brown or inexistent, if there are windows or not, if the sun is shining and the time of day, which way the shadows fall, if there are other people in the space or not, if there is artificial light above — all this changes something in their appearance. Still, reading “Loop” too much through the changing surrounds, shifting light and movement of viewers feels facile; overemphasizing these elements promotes a kind of grandiose pedantry of mind that trivializes the encounter with the object.

I recall Balema’s evocation of a “novel without a plot,” namely Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À Rebours* (1884) [*Against the Grain* or *Against Nature*], which is precisely an exercise in representing the passage of time in which no encounter takes place to break into the decadent repetition, even failing health. In art, looping isn’t just a technique for compulsively repeating the same to ensure homogeneous viewer experience. It can also be a technique to punctuate time with difference by bringing the machine’s repetition into contact with circumstance (art meets exhibition meets visitor meets public). What is produced is a kind of syncopation between the two terms, which is what grounds the work’s appearance in something that is by definition unrepresentable.

We could say “Loop” goes against the obsessive demand for novelty by appearing — and, in fact, being — persistent. Bear the two kinds of repetition in mind: one is the endless flood of commodities to break down dams and enlarge the demand to enjoy, the fantasy of no limit; the other is a kind of spanner in the works, a chink in the chain, that slows things down. Not giving up on saying that one thing, and bearing oneself with absolute fidelity to that thing, despite, and probably, because you have no idea what the consequences will be.

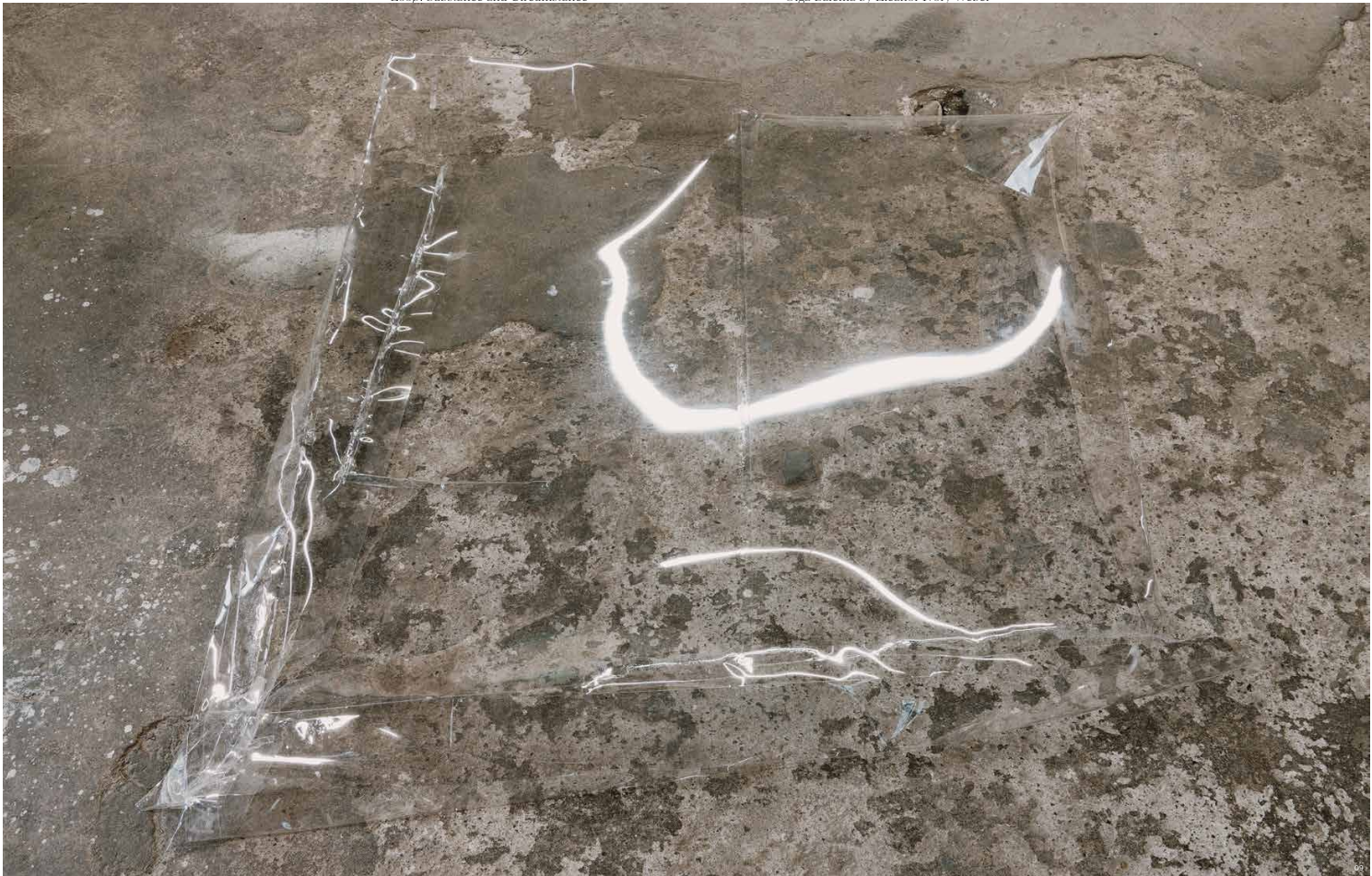
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- 01 *Loop 92*, 2023. Polycarbonate sheeting, acrylic paint, and solvent. 30.5 × 55.9 × 43.2 cm. Photography by Alivia Zivich. Courtesy of the artist; What Pipeline, Detroit; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.
- 02 *Loop 36*, 2023. Polycarbonate sheeting, acrylic paint, and solvent. 60 × 35 × 12 cm. Photography by Kevin Todora. Courtesy of the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.
- 03 *Floor*, 2019. Installation view at Whitney Biennial 2019, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2019. Photography by Ron Amstutz. Courtesy of the artist; Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Bridget Donahue, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles; and Fons Welters, Amsterdam.
- 04 *Bread for Life*, 2016. Installation view at Whitney Biennial 2019, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2019. Photography by Ron Amstutz. Courtesy of the artist; Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Bridget Donahue, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles; and Fons Welters, Amsterdam.

- 05 *Loop 234*, 2025. Installation view at Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2025. Photography by Edward Greiner. Courtesy of the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna.
- 06 *Threat to Civilization 2*, 2015–25. Soft pvc, steel, and water. 48 × 100 × 95 cm. Photography by Edward Greiner. Courtesy of the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna.
- 07, 08 *Computer*, 2021. Details of the installation at Camden Art Centre, London, 2021. Courtesy of the artist; Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Bridget Donahue, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles; and Fons Welters, Amsterdam.
- 09 *Loop 6776*, 2024. Polycarbonate and solvent. 17 × 130 × 129 cm. Photography by Jed Niezgoda. Courtesy of the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna.
- 10 "Loon". Exhibition view at Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles, 2023. Photography by Paul Salvesson. Courtesy of the artist and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.



- 9 Olga Balema, "Olga Balema: There is No Outside of Language," interview by Ross Simonini, *ArtReview*, 2 February 2023: <https://artreview.com/olga-balema-there-is-no-outside-of-language/>.
- 10 Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Polity, 2012), 29.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 63.

A title is telling. In 2017, a group of sculptures from "Loop" were shown at Hannah Hoffman in Los Angeles in a solo show named "Loon." This kind of wordplay and wit is characteristic of Balema's relationship to language. She said in an interview "there is no outside of language for me,"⁹ a pretty succinct definition of Lacanian psychoanalysis. If I interpret "loon," it evokes the "Looney" of Tunes fame but also the word for "pay" or "wage" in Dutch, whose country Balema lived in for two years. It also insists on a minimal difference from "loop," a gap being formed between "n" and "p," with no explanation to cover it. Other titles further illuminate Balema's materialist vocabulary: *The Distance* (2025), *Computer* (2021), *Formulas* (2022), *Threat to Civilization* (2015), *Blasted Health* (2016), *Cannibals* (2015), *The third dimension* (2013), and *Brain Damage* (2019).

Disarmingly, Balema's work distorts my usual looking in relation to the gallery space, especially through enhancing attention to the floor and footing. This was my experience at Bridget Donahue, New York, in whose space Balema's work seems particularly at home, held by the wooden floor. "Brain Damage" is an astonishing series of sculptures, a network of white trouser-elastics placed, knotted, painted, and stretched at ankle height across the gallery floor with the momentum of nails and the wall, establishing contours and intersections just above the ground, some taut, some loose. "Brain Damage" is a surprise, its appearance modest and at the same time grave, a rude awakening. Has she really done it? Is this sculpture? It's certainly not Fred Sandback's geometrical threads, though it has to be mentioned. There's something about the poorness of the material, the tokenistic way paint is applied, the loose ends, the placement so low it's almost invisible, the likelihood of being trodden on, tripped over: all of this accentuates Balema's humor describing the work as her foray into painting.

I can't help but think of Catherine Malabou's sidelining of the elastic (a term used by Deleuze) in favor of the plastic (a term used by Freud), as well as her profound meditation on brain damage in her book-length essay *Ontology of the Accident* (2009). There, brain damage is addressed — perhaps for the first time — as an object worthy of philosophy, and as such, as radical discontinuity, something which as a "blind event" cannot be integrated retrospectively into experience and allows no explanation.¹⁰ Musing on the figure of Marguerite Duras in this context, Malabou writes of the rhetoric technique *asyndeton*, which is obtained through suppressing links and causal connections: "It belongs to the class of disjunctions and it telescopes words, which come one after the other, one on top of the other, occurring as what amounts to so many accidents ... Use of asyndeton may cause interpretative difficulties, confusion."¹¹ And later, still referring to the literary technique, but also, perhaps to the author, who is like an artist: "The subject finds herself at the end, as if emerging from her accidents, from her own destruction, which has no meaning and comes out of nowhere."¹² For her part, when I ask Balema about the title *Brain Damage*, she intimates it is what making art can do to you.

Olga Balema (1984, Lviv) lives and works in New York. Balema's work is characterized by its use of unconventional materials, such as rusting steel, plastic sheeting, and organic matter, to create pieces that often undergo physical changes over time. Recent solo exhibitions include Kunstverein in Hamburg; Bridget Donahue, New York; Hannah Hofmann, Los Angeles; Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam; Croy Nielsen, Vienna; and Camden Arts Centre, London. Her work was included in group exhibitions at Fons Welters, Amsterdam; The Power Station, Dallas; MUMOK, Vienna; Sculpture Parka Cologne; Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich; The Mill, Lismore Castle Arts, Waterford; Woonhuis, Amsterdam; Trautwein Harleth, Berlin; Sperling, Munich; What Pipeline, Detroit; Das Weisse Haus, Vienna; and White Columns, Berlin. Balema's work is on view in "Medardo Rosso. Die Erfindung der modernen Skulptur" at Kunstmuseum Basel until August 10, 2025, and will be included in the group exhibition "Diane A" at Arcadia Missa, London from June 11 until July 29, 2025.

Eleanor Ivory Weber lives in Brussels. She is co-director of Divided Publishing and a doctoral researcher in art and philosophy at the Royal Institute for Theatre, Cinema and Sound and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. In summer 2025, her work is on view at Karlsplatz, Kunsthalle Wien.

CRITICS' PICK HAMBURG

Olga Balema

Kunstverein in Hamburg | Klosterwall 23

February 8, 2025 - April 27, 2025

By Jens Asthoff 🌐
March 28, 2025 2:40 pm



Olga Balema, *Loop 232, 2025*, Polycarbonate, solvent, 27 1/2 × 9 × 21 1/4". From the series "Loop" 2025.
Photo: Edward Greiner.

Olga Balema’s latest outing at Kunstverein in Hamburg manages to redefine space with sculptural interventions that simultaneously elude their surroundings. Fourteen sculptures from the ongoing series “Loop” (all 2025) are prefaced with *Threat to Civilization 2, 2015*, which serves as a quietly disturbing companion in a separate vestibule. The latter work led Balema to develop her series of small to medium-size “Loop” sculptures, made of transparent, ultrathin polycarbonate panes. The thermoplastic synthetic material is produced for industrial applications and not intended for manual processing. Balema manipulates the clear sheets using emphatically simple practices like bending, folding, and cutting. With the aid of solvents, polycarbonate can also be bulged, glued, or modified with streaks or bubbles. Shaping the pieces mostly happens in her studio in varying lighting

conditions, without sketches or preparatory drawings. The final layout is decided at the exhibition site, where the artist makes finishing touches on the artworks and their arrangement. At the Kunstverein—a nearly 10,800-square-foot hall with windows running along two opposite sides—Balema gave herself three weeks for this process, demonstrating the poetic precision with which she shapes the individual works into an ensemble that responds to the room and light.

Many of the translucent pieces were set directly on the gray floor, where they often verged on the invisible. In their crisp crystalline airiness, *Loop 232*, right by the entrance, and *Loop 242*, at the center of the room, seemed like apparitions. Part of the fascination of such works is that they enter the beholder's perception as a surprise and mutate within it—as when changing daylight suddenly causes an unexpected reflection. Some works were in immediate communication with the architecture, such as *Loop 236*: a slender, vertically oriented piece positioned on the floor, almost tenderly leaning on a massive pillar. Balema combined a few works with pedestals, yet instead of using the plinths as a common display tool, she treats them as objects themselves. In the instance of *Loop 241*, the pedestal is laid horizontally on the floor, while *Loop 233* stands beside the pedestal entirely. A gesture of radically anti-monumental bricolage is felt throughout the exhibition, one in which the sculptures perform a multifarious balancing act between presence and invisibility.

Martha Schwedener, "Olga Balema", *New York Times*, December 15, 2023

Olga Balema

Through Jan. 13. Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, Manhattan; 646-896-1368, bridgetdonahue.nyc.

Olga Balema's "The Third Dimension" is the punkest show in town. In the same way that 1970s punk rock was stripped down, anti-virtuosic (no ostentatious guitar solos) and anti-establishment, Balema's clear plastic sculptures are blunt-but-beautiful statements that challenge both the art market's ravenous appetite for painting and the rampant virtue signaling among many of art's players (including artists and critics).

What there is to see here — or not see, since the gallery initially seems empty when you enter it — are 11 sculptures Balema made by bending translucent polycarbonate sheets into geometric forms. Some of the works lean against the wall; all are mysteriously titled "Loop" (2023) and assigned a number. They're a bit like soap bubbles, threatening to vanish at any moment.

What makes Balema's efforts art and not mere provocation are context and history. Her work is clearly in conversation with "heroic," masculinist, minimalist sculpture crafted in marble, bronze or steel. Its virtually see-



VIA OLGA BALEMA AND BRIDGET DONAHUE, NEW YORK; PHOTO BY GREGORY CARIDEO

Olga Balema's "Loop 51125" (2023), made of polycarbonate sheeting, acrylic paint and solvent.

through, plain plastic materials may goad some viewers to call it the emperor's new clothes, except that the empty-gallery-as-philosophically-significant-void is yet another celebrated trope in art history, particularly when enacted by male artists. (It's become a signature gesture for Balema, whose last exhibition at Bridget Donahue in 2019 was an artless web of elastic bands stretched across the floor, titled "Brain Damage.")

In the current moment, this show speaks powerfully to the utopian promises of avant-garde art. Who gets to be free? In music, punk rock and free jazz answered this call; in visual art, we have this.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Alec Racinos, “Olga Balema at Hannah Hoffman Gallery”, *Carla*, August, 2023, 52-54

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Olga Balema, *Loop 53* (2023).
Polycarbonate sheeting, acrylic paint, and solvent,
36.5 × 28 × 22 inches. Image courtesy of the artist
and Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles.
Photo: Paul Salveson.

Olga Balema at Hannah Hoffman Gallery

April 8–May 20, 2023

Olga Balema's second solo show at Hannah Hoffman Gallery, *Loon*, inspired an almost immediate sense of suspicion. The gallery contained the usual trappings: gallery assistant at the front desk, press release and checklist available—so far, so good. Though, after that, things became a little complicated. Save several pedestals, the gallery appeared empty at first glance. But soon, 16 pieces of plastic scattered throughout the space came into focus, emerging almost as if out of thin air. (To be precise, the show contained 16 sculptures fabricated from polycarbonate sheeting, acrylic paint, and solvent, each bearing similar, vague names like *Loop 17* or *Loop 135* [all works 2023].) Suspicion, however, was not the endpoint for Balema's exhibition, only the start of the aesthetic experience. Though viewing this exhibition began with a dubious feeling, Balema successfully leveraged this wariness to force a sustained encounter with her sculpture. Without the suspicion, the viewer might have lost the sense of intrigue and the incentive to move beyond first impressions to truly engage with the works.

The unease of this viewing experience will not be completely unexpected for those familiar with Balema's practice. Her sculptures often occupy a space that barely registers as art—they are made of

anonymous industrial materials, shaped into nondescript forms, and frequently strewn loosely across the gallery floor. They are minimalist in the original sense of the term, coined by British philosopher Richard Wollheim in 1965 to characterize the then-nascent artistic movement which centered around cold, simple, almost featureless structures that were either "to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves and therefore [possessed] very low content of any kind, or else the differentiation they [did] exhibit...[came] not from the artist but from a nonartistic source, like nature or the factory."¹ Put simply, art of this kind privileged generic form and industrial materiality at the cost of the traditional hallmark of an artwork's quality: the trace of the artist's hand. Balema centers her work around similar concerns, relinquishing her own touch in pursuit of materials, forms, and installation strategies with a "minimal art-content."²

Take, for example, Balema's 2019 exhibition *brain damage* at Bridget Donahue in New York. From waist height up, there was nothing in the gallery. Instead, intricate networks of elastic bands were stretched tautly into grids that hovered above the ground or slumped in slack lines on the floor. Since the artwork consisted solely of the elastic's skeletal contours carving out space, instead of a substantive material body, the viewer's gaze was always filled more prominently with the typically overlooked interstitial areas of the gallery (especially the floor) than with the work itself. Consequently, this installation, like much of

Balema's output, produced a strange oscillation in the relationship between both figure and ground and art object and negative space—a gesture that simultaneously delineated the limits of sculpture while opening up its possibilities.

The wispy plastic forms in *Loon* elicited a similar feeling. These sculptures are rendered bare and stripped to their most basic parts. Each piece is almost easier to describe as what it is not, rather than what it is. This is in large part due to the material: The clear polycarbonate, like all transparent objects, can only be seen as a result of its interaction with the surrounding environment. Balema expertly accentuated this quality through her installation: The artworks were de-emphasized in the gallery, which almost appeared to be displaying its emptiness—the pedestals drew the eye more than any of the individual works. Each of the sculptures, too, seemed bent on denying its value. *Loop 70*, for example, leaned crumpled against its plinth as if it had fallen off and wasn't worth replacing, while *Loop 112* brought to mind the cellophane wrapper of a pack of cigarettes littered on the floor. Contributing to this paucity was the fungibility between every work, as each piece was made from the same set of materials and looked nearly identical to every other, save for variations in scale and shape.

And yet, something *does* delineate these sculptures, giving them form and allowing the viewer to identify them as distinct entities. Impressions of Balema's labor are evident in the shape of the plastic sheets, their heat-induced

discolorations, and scars from the solvent. These were seen most clearly in *Loop 92*, a collapsed mass perched atop a pedestal, whose numerous folds and wrinkles refracted the gallery lights to produce bright highlights that drew the eye, while a long dark trapezium streak and several burnt umber smudges stained the surface. The very thing that seemed initially to be lacking from the sculptures—the artist’s hand and effort—ultimately is the precondition for their recognition. What one then notices is not the collection of artwork itself, but the interruptions scarring each piece’s surface, the marks made by the artist’s action.

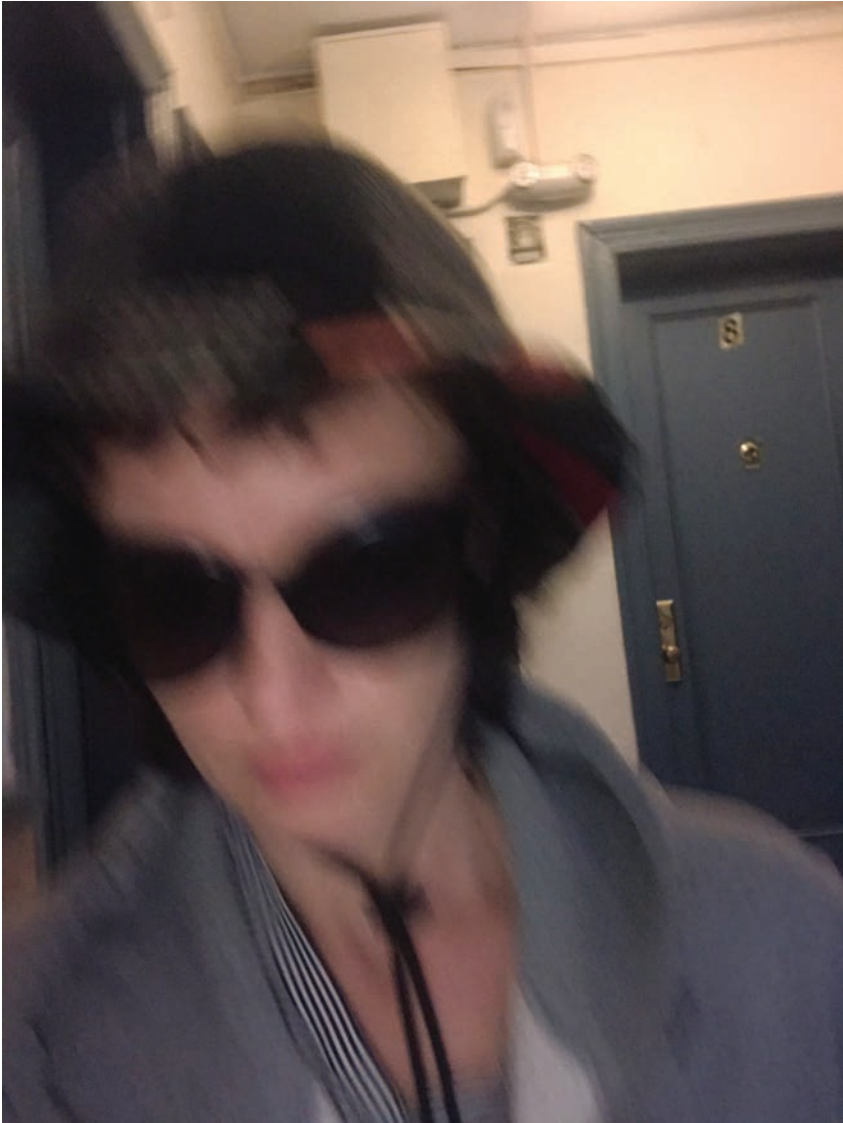
Lingering with the *Loops* reaped rewards as initial appearances began to dissolve and a more complex understanding took shape. By deflating their sense of material importance, the sculptures in *Loon* forego a simple encounter between object and viewer to instead bring into focus the artist’s labor. One is left not with a fully realized artwork separated from its making, but instead a strange specimen in which process and form are always bound together and simultaneously experienced. This, too, recalls minimalist works like Robert Morris’ *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), a small wooden cube fitted with a speaker inside that plays a 3.5-hour recording of Morris fabricating the piece. But while process and duration are similarly highlighted here, they remain obfuscated by the pristine, opaque cube which appears as a standalone object. Balema instead leverages the qualities

of the material—here, the clarity of the polycarbonate—to produce a truly transparent artwork that harnesses its context to activate both the viewer and the environment, visualizing the actions and processes that brought them into being.

1. Richard Wollheim, “Minimal Art,” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 387.

2. Wollheim, “Minimal Art,” 387.

Ross Simonini, "Olga Balema: There is No Outside of Language" *ArtReview* (February 2), <https://artreview.com/olga-balema-there-is-no-outside-of-language/>



Courtesy the artist

The Interview
by Ross Simonini

Olga Balema

“There is no ‘outside of language’ for me,
there is always a lot of language going on in my head,
even if it’s nonlinear or incoherent”

The work of Olga Balema offers a satisfying defiance. She maintains a fluid approach to every aspect of her art: titles, forms, expectations and materials, which are occasionally actual fluids. Most often you will find her work resting on the ground, slumped or flat, and settling into the architecture.

Her recent show *Formulas*, at Croy Nielsen in Vienna, is a collection of tilelike works, placed on the floor, where they appear to have been broken, then reassembled into elegantly inellegant collage. Her work *brain damage* (2019) is an installation of sundry spindly threads, stretched at ankle level: a patternless and beguiling web. Another work, *Motherfucker* (2016), exhibited at

the Baltic Triennial in 2018, features sagging breasts affixed to crudely painted ripped maps. (Balema was born in Ukraine, in 1984, and moved to the United States while a teenager.)

For me, Balema’s works have always been characterised by mystery, especially her ongoing series of clear acrylic sculptures. Almost entirely transparent, they rest quietly between the wall and floor, without any interest in announcing their form. Looked at from a certain angle, in a certain light, they would not appear to exist at all.

This translucence is often accented by Balema’s modest installations and bare context. Many of her works are untitled, and in the past

she has not been particularly vocal about her work, doing no interviews and making few written statements. But in line with her resistance to consistency, other work carries elaborate titles (eg, *Manifestations of our own wickedness and future idiocy*, 2017), and at times in the interview below she even responded loquaciously.

Initially when I reached out to Balema about an interview, she turned me down. But eventually we began to speak: first over the phone, then in a series of email exchanges. During this time, she was busy, intermittently sick and installing multiple shows around the world. Our exchange occurred over three seasons.

A Process of No Process

ROSS SIMONINI *You said you were late to our conversation last week because you were installing video chat software. Did you manage to avoid video during the pandemic?*

OLGA BALEMA *I had to install it on my phone, my computer doesn’t have the right headphone jack. But yes, I was not zooming much during the pandemic.*

RS *Do you use your computer much for your art?*

OB *Some email. I write on the computer.*

RS *Your work Computer [2021], a vast floor collage, somehow led me to assume that you weren’t much of a computer person.*

OB *I’m not anti, I just don’t really get excited for new technology and try to keep the same devices for as long as I can. I did use a computer to make that work, an old, kind of dirty computer.*

RS *That title does a lot of work for the piece. Are you careful about titles?*

OB *Yes. There were a lot of titles swirling around in my mind. And Computer seemed like a nice followup to brain damage. I usually come up with titles during the making of a piece, or after, which is why a lot of things are not titled. If I’m struggling too much, I just leave it untitled. I feel like if I do have a title, I want*

it to add something to the piece. Computer added a sense of humour that maybe would have been lacking otherwise.

RS *What kind of writing are you doing on the computer?*

OB *Lectures, job applications, grant applications, interviews, press releases. Descriptions of my work for myself and the public. Emails.*

RS *You mentioned interviews. Have you done others?*

OB *This is my first ‘real’ interview. But I have done some fake interviews with myself. There is also a conversation I once did with another artist.*

RS *Do you read about art or artists?*

OB *Yes, sporadically. Recently I read a Duchamp biography I found on the street in my neighbourhood. Since I’m not moving around as much, I’m trying to buy more books. Reading about other artists can be really inspiring, but it’s also a double-edged sword, because you can end up getting swept up in ideas that have nothing to do with you. Getting hijacked for a second. For example, I did a lecture on the artist Maria Nordman at Dia [Art Foundation, New York]. I was supposed to deliver it in April 2020, so I was doing my research for it in the month before that. Then the pandemic hit and I put it aside and did not think about it for another year. In the meantime I was working on Computer and I was noticing that I had some*

ideas in my head about it, some concerns that even though related to my past work somehow sat weird. Thoughts about how the audience would almost be finishing the work by wearing it out through movement, that without the audience the work does not really exist. Which partially came from working with a public institution and becoming more aware of how the audience in a way bears a lot of responsibility for its longevity and continued existence. But also in combination with other aspects of the piece, like bringing the piece outside and frottaging the sidewalks in New York. Here I recognised echoes of Nordman’s ideas, especially once I took up preparing the lecture again. It was an instance of not intentionally taking someone else’s work as a reference point, but the idea operating in a deep background.

RS *Does social conversation feel laboured for you?*

OB *I mean... I don’t think I would be described by most people as someone who loves to talk.*

RS *You sound like someone who doesn’t think in language.*

OB *I would say that, but when I observe myself, I realise there is no ‘outside of language’ for me, there is always a lot of language going on in my head, even if it’s nonlinear or incoherent. It shapes how I see.*

RS *Do you think with your hands?*

OB *I think with everything: my hands, my brain, my eyes. I can’t say that I only think with one part of my body. A lot of the work happens through association or a kind of visual or textural rhyming in the studio. Physically making things does help in that process. I can’t say that I have a set process of how I do things. Sometimes I come up with something I want to do in my head, and then I try to do it and then it kind of doesn’t work out and I go from there. Or it does work out and then it’s there. Or I abandon it. So it’s a process of no process.*

RS *Are you resistant to pinning down your process?*

OB *I’m just trying to be honest. A lot also depends on circumstance and factors outside of my control, like the aesthetics of the places I am showing, shipping constraints, etc.*

RS *Do you purposely avoid repetition?*

OB *I used to. There was a lot I wanted to try, and I made this resolution that I would keep my practice very open, make each body of work different from the previous. I found a lot of pleasure and energy in not being consistent, or maybe in trying to figure out a consistency that was more of a feeling than a set of visual attributes. Also I thought it was important that the work was difficult and uncomfortable to absorb. So I really made an effort towards this. Now I am making an effort to stay in the same register a bit more.*

RS *And why do you want that?*

OB *I think the shift has been gradual and more internal. I was becoming overwhelmed with the amount of work I was doing and exhausted from the adrenaline rush of constantly trying to do something different and letting too many ideas in. The work became more reduced and quieter because I hit a point at which I was mentally unable to do things like going into the metal workshop and facing the fumes and dust. Also, practically, in New York it’s a true feat to have access to production facilities, especially if you want to do the work yourself and can’t pay a lot of money. So I think it’s partially an adaptation to moving to a very expensive, visually stimulating, loud, crowded city and a response to a need to feel more grounded. That said, ‘same register’ doesn’t mean repetition. I’m still searching for things. It’s important for me that the work feels alive.*

RS *Have you felt much resistance to that kind of experimental approach?*

OB *No, not too much from the people I work with. I established this way of working early on as part of my practice, so I assume the people who would resist just did not approach me.*

RS *Your most recent work at Barbara Weiss in Berlin is working with the same materials and gestures as brain damage. What does that kind of recapitulation do for you?*

OB *The works at Barbara Weiss were ones I made in 2019 and did not install. So I was engaging with the same body of work, rather than repeating.*

RS *Do you often show older work?*

OB *I do, and I find it very rewarding, especially when I have not seen something for a long time. It often informs my current work and helps me to understand new ideas I have. I would love to do a show of just older works and see how they all speak to each other and interrelate.*

RS *Repetition seems to create what we call style. How do you define style?*

OB *At its best iteration, it’s being able to work with your limitations. At its worst, it’s being contrived.*

Mrs. Hippy

RS *Do you enjoy making your work?*

OB *Sometimes.*

RS *Do you prefer the work you made with enjoyment rather than work in struggle?*

OB *It depends on when you ask me. Maybe when I’m first showing it I prefer the work I made with enjoyment, because maybe I’m more confident in it. But with some distance it ends up not mattering.*



Computer, 2021, mixed media, 425 × 100 cm. Photo: Rob Harris.
Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Camden Art Centre, London



brain damage, 2019 (installation view, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019).
Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York





above *Formula 15*, 2022, foam, latex, 25 × 24 cm. Photo: Kunst-dokumentation.com.
Courtesy the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna

preceding pages *Manifestations of our own wickedness and future idiocy*, 2017,
Rowlux paper, steel, photographs, 254 × 518 × 203 cm. Courtesy the artist;
Bridget Donahue, New York; Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Fons Welters, Amsterdam;
and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles

RS *While working, is there a feeling you find yourself returning to more often than others?*

OB One of my favourite feelings when I work is when I have had a new idea and am rushing to execute it in one way or another. It feels very urgent in a fun way.

RS *When you were young, did you know you'd be an artist?*

OB Maybe from the age of thirteen I wanted to be an artist. But before that we moved around a lot, and things were looser for me. I moved to the US when I was fourteen and decided to study art once I was in college. Or 'decided' is maybe too strong a word. I started creeping towards becoming an artist. I had some really great teachers, Lee Running and Isabel Barbuzza, who blew my mind with what sculpture could be and were generally very encouraging.

RS *What were you making at thirteen?*

OB Drawings of dolphins and celebrities. I used makeup like eyeshadow and lipstick for drawing, to be experimental. I also made collages with iridescent stickers in order to put them on a copy machine and see how the iridescence would be reproduced by the machine. It was exciting to see the different images I would get from the same image sources.

RS *Where were you before the US?*

OB I was born in Lviv, Ukraine, and we moved to Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1991. We stayed there

for a year and moved back to Lviv, lived there for two years and then moved to Leipzig in Germany. After that we spent some time again in Lviv before moving to Ames, Iowa, in the US.

RS *How did all these places affect you differently?*

OB I had the idea to reinvent myself each time I moved, but I always stayed the same, except for the usual changes one encounters when growing up. It wasn't always easy to adjust to constant change. Some places were more hostile than others. When I lived in Leipzig I was the most unhappy, but I also developed my interest in being creative then. I had a lot of time to myself and I would try to learn how to play guitar and record myself singing. I also spent a lot of time at music stores, listening to CDs at listening stations. There was a store called Mrs. Hippy that my friends' older friends shopped at. It smelled very strongly of patchouli and a lot of goths shopped there. I wasn't really allowed to buy stuff there, but I loved to go and look. There were a lot of different subcultures around like goths, punks, ravers, also neo-Nazis. Some of my schoolmates were already going to the Love Parade in Berlin at the age of thirteen. When I moved to Iowa at fourteen the scene was very different. The kids were much more wholesome in general, less angsty and edgy, more into sports and watching movies.

My most formative years were spent in Ukraine. It's where I first thought, spoke, heard

and saw, learned how to exist and relate to people, I'm not sure how to encompass that experience, because it's the most distant and also most present. The tragedy of the war has made this distance/presence most palpable. I am safe from physical violence, but to know what a place looks, feels, smells, sounds like and now it is being blown up sent me into a different corner of reality, one I was unable to imagine before. And even with that understanding I can't begin to approximate the reality and distress my family and the Ukrainian people are experiencing in the face of the brutality and violence of the war.

RS *Do you consider your history and identity to be a significant part of your work?*

OB I think it shapes the why and the how, but maybe not *what* I make. By that I mean my history and identity are not the subject matter of my work. My work concerns itself more with formal explorations, materials that I encounter in my present, art-historical concerns, feelings, etc. But I think how things end up coming out or what I am interested in has to do with my history and identity. I would not believe myself if I said my work has nothing to do with my history. There is no escaping yourself. It comes through.

Ross Simonini is a writer, painter, and composer.
He is the host of ArtReview's podcast Subject, Object, Verb



Computer, 2021, mixed media, 425 × 100 cm.
Photo: Rob Harris. Courtesy the artist;
Bridget Donahue, New York; and Camden Art Centre, London

Flash Art

•REVIEWS

20 July 2021, 9:00 am CET

Olga Balema "Computer" Camden Art Centre / London

by Alex Bennett

Olga Balema, *Computer*, Installation View, Camden Art Centre, May 21 - August 29, 2021 Photo: Rob Harris

All for the little nature of water lilies, Claude Monet developed a portion of land and diverted a narrow arm of the river Epte to quench his water garden. He acquired new hybrid lilies seen at the Paris world's fair in 1889 and instituted a Japanese footbridge from which to admire them — the lilies themselves planted in thirty-liter pots to preserve their color balance.¹

Bamboos, ginkgo and maple trees, Japanese peonies, wisteria and weeping willows: Monet's artificial garden precipitated a mille-feuille of yet more artifice. It is an entropic dream-machine fashioned from imperial strategies of acquisitive transposition, commodifying Japanese culture and practice while simultaneously instilling its inferiority. Its extractive relations transform an ecosystem into a vignette manicured for the imaginary, beckoning the practice of circulation and representation. And yet, Monet once remarked: "I just took a catalogue and chose at random, that's all."²

One reads Olga Balema's exhibition title with a similarly insouciant tonality: *Computer* (2021), that's all. The allusion of a kind of casualness is extended in the work's source as well as the fact of its fatigued, worked state, while Balema's sculpture involves the circulation and machinations of image production, it alights from an object literally domesticated underfoot — a rug. Prostrate and parched, the rinsed, impressionistic blue swirls and shivery, etiolated ginkgo leaves in Balema's large floor sculpture momentarily evoke Monet's projective fantasies, yet within a field of deliberate, withering flatness. The pattern is sourced from a domestic "Prismatic Daydream Rug" and is digitally printed in the provisional materiality prevalent to billboards, each rug reproduced with varying degrees of lucidity and blur. Dog-eared, its blanched edges of pixilation disintegrate into blemished papery plastic, itself dragged through New York streets to accumulate dust, hair, dirt, as well as fresh afflictions: grazes, scuffs, peelings. Cut, stuck, stripped and compressed, *Computer*, then, is a plush attrition.



Olga Balema, *Computer*, Installation View, Camden Art Centre, May 21 - August 29, 2021 Photo: Rob Harris

An initial encounter could ascribe the work with decrecence and deprivation, given its thinning materiality and atrophying imagery. This elected reducibility has created material exhaustion, which strains the desire to compel significance within something so open, passive, weak. Yet as a terrain of vulnerability, like staring into a pool of water that just reflects irresolute pondering, the tension of *Computer*'s disturbance and susceptibility is decidedly mutual: viewers are encouraged to walk over its surface and in turn forced to reconsider the influence of one's step. Like a reverie: the slow lurch of dislocation. Yet there is no submergence or succulence; *Computer* perpetually deflates the daydream, letting its flimsy fantasy settle into the craquelure of its waterless surface. Balema's *Computer* permits its own ruination in the destructive

accretion of other physical gestures, splintering its integrity, or rather, its integrity hinging on doubt and defeat such that its meaning might extinguish into a litter of shagged pixels and crushed glitches. In spite of my desire for more pointed infestation and less causality, in its material data, Balema's Computer is still, like every other computer, a time machine of sorts. Though in its entropic accrual of prosaic and contingent 'data', Computer's memory is literally laid bare and in its devastation, more like the process of decay — which ungrounds the ground.

1 <https://www.artic.edu/articles/886/the-real-water-lilies-of-giverny>; and Matilde Guidelli-Guidi, Computer, Filed Note 132, Camden Art Centre, 2021.

2 <https://fondation-monet.com/en/giverny/the-water-garden/>

Sohrab Mohebbi, "Best of 2019", *Artforum*, December, 2019, 182.

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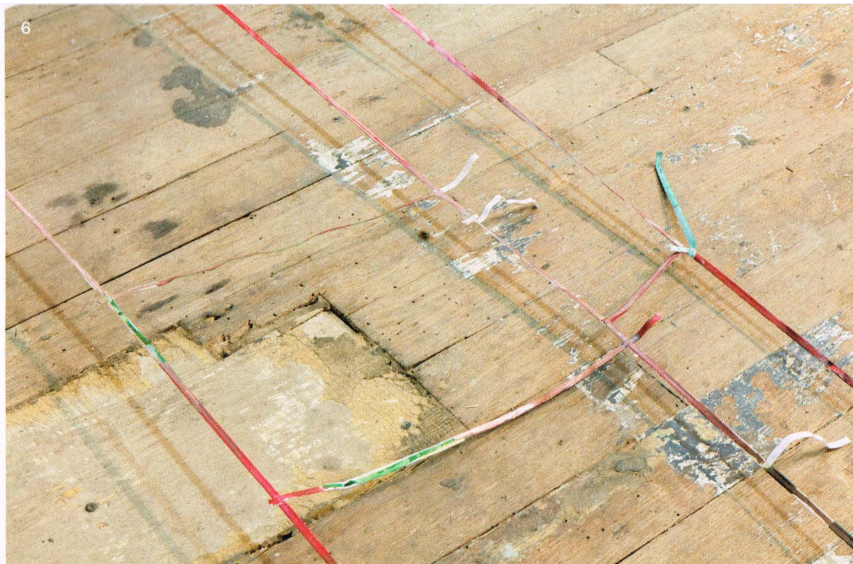
BEST OF 2019

SOHRAB MOHEBBI

Sohrab Mohebbi is a writer and curator at SculptureCenter, New York. He has recently organized, in no particular order, solo exhibitions by Fiona Connor and Banu Cennetoğlu and the group show "Searching the Sky for Rain."

6

OLGA BALEMA (BRIDGET DONAHUE, NEW YORK) What is the least amount of art that can constitute a work? Balema's exquisite and scanty show "brain damage" proposed an answer. Composed from elastic bands, staples, and nails, the spread of thirteen pieces resembled a deteriorating set of intersecting grids. Reducing art to the bare minimum, the exhibition tiptoed the line between artwork and its absence.



Laura Brown, "Olga Balema, 'brain damage' ", *Flash Art*, September/October 2019, 108-109.

2 OLGA BALEMA

"brain damage"

Bridget Donahue, New York
by Laura Brown

Olga Balema's "brain damage" places words onto the convoluted bodily pathways with which you might read a room. At Bridget Donahue, the floor is ready: faded wood covered in paint splatters, shadows of color, and other signs of mystery time. Lines at all angles hover above this ground. These are long stretches of elastic, painted and knotted into a vast net and tacked low to the space by nails and staples. Broken into thirteen unapparent parts, it's fun to relate Balema's installation to images of spiders' webs woven under the influence of various drugs; the two methodologies share an anfractuosity sensibility. Some tendrils reach up the wall or settle onto the floor. Throughout, the elastic's tension changes with time. Although each line functions against a respective backdrop, the work cannot really be described as site-specific. Something greater is happening.

This big network of sculpture is absolutely time-based. The work is far longer and larger than what the current room holds, although this is its immediate status. What is brain damage? The sudden destruction or deterioration of the brain's cells—otherwise the longest-living cells in the body. Applied by Balema, a rich red stain feels familiar, as does the personality of a frazzled knot. These parts weren't processed once. Like a garment exposed to the weather, new smudges and curls accrue through movement. Over and over I crouch down to get a closer look, becoming dizzy in the process. Each movement has an effect. Each detail is a decision, the result of an action. Details become reminders: new neural connections. Later on, someplace else, a loose nail seen on a floor makes me flash back to this moment. Pre-staged, these sinuous networks traveled flat into the gallery—and will keep traveling. Being in fact a very large amount of sculpture, every single

element is impossible to take into account. "Brain damage" is a circuit of shifting information, a stretchable presence, like a life.



2 Olga Balema, 1, 2019. Elastic band, paint, glue, nails, staples. 7×302×52in. Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

Mira Dayal, "Olga Balema: Bridget Donahue", *Artforum*, September, 2019, 257

ARTFORUM

Olga Balema

BRIDGET DONAHUE

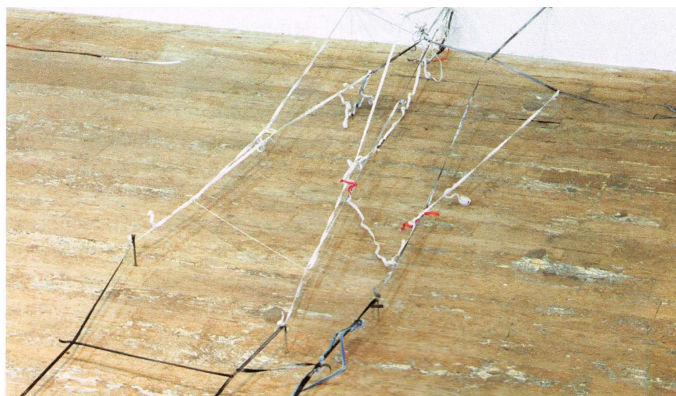
10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5 . . . The integers titling Olga Balema's thirteen works, all produced this year, descended unsteadily in a clockwise direction from Bridget Donahue's entrance. Each number corresponded to a diagrammatic composition of thin elastic strips, some of which were stretched out in lengths of up to forty-five feet, raised slightly above the floor by the nails and staples that held them in place. In some areas the strands were split in two or glued together to create intersections, mostly at right angles; elsewhere, extraneous bands curled underfoot, like crimped ribbons or dried flora, while others crept up the walls as if seeking escape. The numeric titles and limited media heightened the impression that these were formal exercises, less figurative than most of Balema's work—packages of latex, photographs, sundry fluids, or assemblages of steel and fleshy ingredients not unfamiliar to the contemporary art landscape. The reduced means were refreshing, encouraging visitors to walk more slowly and look more carefully.

Balema had painted significant swaths of her white elastic black, blue, green, and red—the uneven coats of acrylic strained from the tautness. Much of the paint was matte, save for the moments of lustrous, deep charcoal in 1. The colors occasionally matched traces of paint on the sanded wooden floor. At certain points, discerning figure from ground became difficult, and it was hard to see the work. The viewer's sense of perceptual confusion was enhanced by the shadows and various odd intersections of the pieces. The show's title, "brain damage," might have referred to that disorientation, or to the overall effect of the installation, which resembled a synaptic network dotted with the broken pathways of loosely hanging and insecurely attached strings. Though quite different from her more corporeal sculptures, the painted elastic still evoked flesh and its coverings, such as the cinched waistbands and cuffs of mass-produced clothing (one could almost feel that quick snap against the skin). Given these bodily connotations, and perhaps in the context of Bridget Donahue's raw exhibition space—a prewar loft on the Bowery in Manhattan—"brain damage" felt like the draft stage of an Eva Hesse sculpture, particularly in regard to the Minimalist's "notorious fragility and insistent decay," as the art historian Karen Kurczynski once described.

Though less technically refined than Hesse's art, Balema's work is characterized by a procedural, relatively two-dimensional use of the synthetic fiber that lets it settle into many permutations of line—drawing, clothesline, circuit, boundary, poetic unit of verse. Some pertinent associations: The system of roughly gridded cords and stakes on the floor resembled the similarly constructed outlines that might be placed in raw earth to plan the foundation of a building, or the strings and flagging pins that mark off excavation units at archaeological sites—the first stages of building up or digging down. Balema's layouts are too small and jumbled (or damaged?) to correspond to stable architectures or meaningful coordinates, but they might serve as a purely conceptual architectural plan—think Siah Armajani's *North Dakota Tower*, 1968, a design he drafted in the late 1960s for a structure that would cast a shadow over the width of the titular state. The implication of additional dimensions also conjured a more flexible version of Duchamp's *Sixteen Miles of String*, 1942—minus, unfortunately, the ur-Conceptualist's deviousness and criticality.

Yet Balema is neither architect nor archaeologist nor painter. She is a sculptor. And by utilizing a reduced palette, so to speak, and just a sliver of the gallery's volume, she opened up her work to wider interpretations than her more immediately seductive sculptures allow. Elastic is manufactured for flexibility and reuse; Balema's sculptures can be restretched and reordered into new iterations, suggesting that even established forms inevitably change over time.

—Mira Dayal



Olga Balema, 1, 2019
elastic bands, paint,
glue, nails, staples,
dimensions variable.

David Everitt Howe, "Olga Balema's Rubber Band Works Show How Less Can Be More", *Art in America*, August 22, 2019. <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/olga-balema-rubber-bands-bridget-donahue/>

Art in America

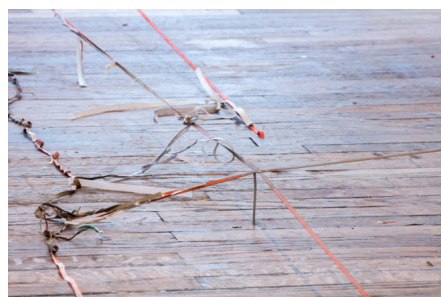
REVIEWS August 22, 2019

Olga Balema's Rubber Band Works Show How Less Can Be More

NEW YORK

at Bridget Donahue
by David Everitt Howe

Olga Balema: 4, 2019,
elastic band, paint,
glue, nails, staples, 4
by 69 by 91 inches; at
Bridget Donahue.



New Museum founder Marcia Tucker was famously fired from the Whitney for curating a Richard Tuttle retrospective that included, among other things, string laid out on a rug. To Hilton Kramer, who reviewed the show for the *New York Times*, it was “remorselessly and irredeemably less . . . and fairly bask[ed] in the void of lessness.” One wonders what the late conservative critic would have thought of Olga Balema, whose nebulous sculptures are featured in the current Whitney Biennial and whose recent exhibition at Bridget Donahue, “brain damage,” consisted of long elastic bands crisscrossing the floor of the space, some painted and others left their original white. If Tuttle espoused an

economy of means, Balema has a maximalist tendency, filling the gallery with so many elastics stretched between nails and staples that you had to be careful where you walked, lest the whole thing break apart. Given the prevalence today of artwork focused on digital means and political subject matter, Balema's use of such a dumb, simple material felt somehow poignant and rousingly different.

Balema spent the months before "brain damage" laying out the bands in her studio, stapling them to the walls, gluing them together to form joints, and nailing them to the floor. Thirteen works took shape. They appear nearly indistinguishable from one another, though, as they say, God is in the details. 1 (all works 2019) looks like a sagging stepladder hovering horizontally over the ground and culminating, where it attaches to the wall, in a rogue assortment of white, gray, and black bands that curl like ribbons. Installed a few feet to the side, 2 features bands painted in dreamy swaths of green, brown, and umber. It provided one of the few decidedly vertical moments in the show, with three of its bands stapled a couple feet or so up the wall—one connected tightly to a nail in the floor and continuing along an angled path, and the other two hanging down sort of lazily as part of an unstretched design. Who knew elastic bands could have so much character?

In 4, unpainted bands stapled to the wall trail into pastalike messes on the ground or attach to blue-tinted bands that wrap around nails at the work's other end, while 5 is a barely-there stretch of two bands. Both works feature elastics with stray nails attached to their ends: vestiges of the works' installation in Balema's studio. Such details made you wonder how far the works at Bridget Donahue might have strayed from their original versions, and where the line between repeatability and site-specificity is when the medium is a bunch of strung-together elastics. In any case, Balema's skillful handiwork commanded the space, providing an instance in which less, in the form of a painfully mundane material, was notably more.

Amelia Farley, “Olga Balema: brain damage”, *The Brooklyn Rail*, July, 2019. <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/07/artseen/Olga-Balema-brain-damage>

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Olga Balema: *brain damage*

by Amelia Farley

NEW YORK

Bridget Donahue

May 25 – July 26, 2019



Installation view: *Olga Balema: brain damage*, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019. Courtesy Bridget Donahue.

Like the condition to which it refers, the exhibition *brain damage* does not just invoke a locus of injury, but also the diffusion of its effects. Across the flecked, uneven floor of Bridget Donahue, Olga Balema has scattered dozens of yards' worth of garment-grade elastic bands. They have been painted and artificially distressed; arranged into shallow, cobwebbed arrays in Balema's studio;

transported in crates; and meticulously rearranged, in formation, in the gallery. The bands are variously tied, stapled, nailed, and tacked together to form a number of small provisional structures—what the press release says is “100% sculpture.” But Balema’s work, in its elasticity, lacks the resolution of form that this absolute expression might suggest. Several of the nails appear to be structurally unnecessary; many of the bands are slack, while others are pulled taut between the wall and a nail hammered into the floor. They frequently intersect: one axis meets another, and another, and so on. Each confederation of elastic bands, extending no more than a few feet off of the ground, is a score of intersections, drawing our attention to axial tensions—or playing us once more against our expectation of significance, of relation.

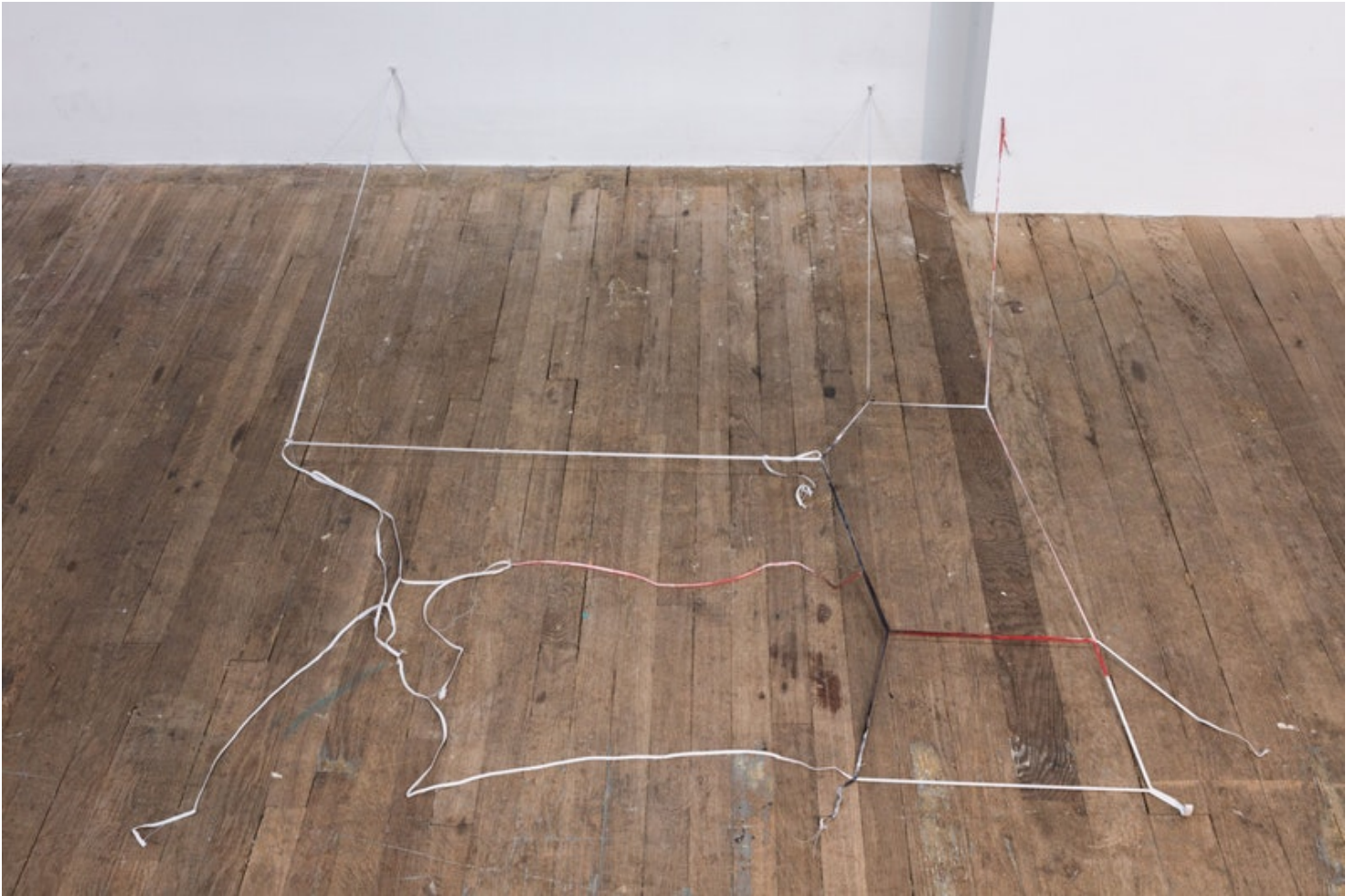
Brain damage is Balema’s most economical solo show to date. Her sculptures (all 2019) are sparse but not severe; they are numbered—1 through 13—but don’t progress throughout the room chronologically. The painted strings recall the cinematic trope of red thread used to connect leads across the bulletin boards of conspiracy theorists. Perhaps the connections will surface surprising relationships, or perhaps they are all coincidental and cold. As if to wink at the austere precision of minimalist sculpture—like the careful parallels and vertices of a Fred Sandback—Balema’s arbitrary arrangements are characteristically tongue-in-cheek. If Sandback’s “vertical constructions” refer to an upright human body, Balema’s horizontal entanglements refer to a prostrate one. Low to the ground and without clear thoroughfares, the sprawling installation is conspicuously hazardous, refusing to honor pedestrian space. But that isn’t to say that the matrices aren’t somehow cartographic, like meridians or ley lines. The lateral infrastructure of *brain damage* addresses the under-considered architectural matters of the floor, concerning itself with the space just below the viewers’ sightline.

If not maliciously intended, certainly the delicate build of *brain damage* is precarious. Its nervous highways organize into a situation which, apparently, indicates risk: a printed-out sign near the entryway warns, “Please tread carefully!” Balema’s architectural interventions in the gallery space are easily missable; they are liable to be stepped on or tripped over. Most of the cords comprising *brain damage*, however, are not stretched, but flaccid, shriveled, weary—almost pitifully so. Connections are exhausted and unreliable. The damage Balema presents here suggests a kind of attrition: a slow, processual wearing-away; a frying of the nerves.



Installation view: *Olga Balema: brain damage*, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019. Courtesy Bridget Donahue.

Balema's modest list of materials—elastic band, paint, glue, nails, staples—leaves out the occasional wisp of curling ribbon or organza, which are haphazardly tacked on throughout, as if by accident. These unexpectedly whimsical elements seem to be caught in the grid, like wet leaves stuck in a storm drain grate, or a still-fluttering moth freshly snagged by a spider web. Such details might leave viewers wondering what to regard, and what to disregard, in the overall material roster of the show. Balema's arrangements often appear accidental. Seen from above, the sloppy entanglements of *brain damage* might read like a decision matrix, or a game plan, where the elastic cords represent vectors between possible, contingent outcomes. The elastic medium itself is necessarily scalable, flexible, and contingent. It expands the field of possibility.



Installation view: *Olga Balema: brain damage*, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019. Courtesy Bridget Donahue.

The total surround of *brain damage* has an aural quality. Perhaps Balema's interest in nerves, numbers, and networks is related to harmonics? Sound is an effect of nervous excitement. The elastic cord, in its tautness, approximates a stringed instrument. If excited, as an auditory nerve, it could generate a musical note. Alternatively, the crisscrossed elastic resembles a set of patch cords connecting modules in an analog synthesizer. Not literally audible, *brain damage* can be regarded as a composition of mathematical relations, for example between the length of the string and the pitch it produces, or amongst the sizes of intervals in the plan of temperament. The musical technologies of 1 through 13, untuned and out of order, imply intentionally harsh noise—a raucous field of sound. This composition is evoked rather than emitted. In their silence, these acoustic properties are latent—and, literally, suspended. All circuits are broken; all reception is cancelled.

Martha Schwendener, "Olga Balema", *The New York Times*, July 18, 2019.

The New York Times

Olga Balema

Through July 26. Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, Manhattan; 646-896-1368, bridgetdonahue.nyc.



Olga Balema's "12," from 2019, consists of elastic band, paint, glue, nails and staples.
Olga Balema and Bridget Donahue, NYC

Sometimes in art, it's not a question of how much you can get away with but how little. Olga Balema takes this second approach in her provocative show "Brain Damage" at Bridget Donahue.

"Brain Damage" is so spare it feels initially like entering an empty gallery. (Photographs of the show also create this illusion.) Along the floor, however, Ms. Balema has stretched, twisted and tacked together a network of thin white elastic cords. Most are laid out in geometric fashion, suggesting a jerry-built network, like a homemade circuit board or an energy grid. The show's title echoes the uncanny presentation, which is simultaneously pared down and dense since you have to step carefully around the elastic cords to avoid wrecking the installation.

The show relies on multiple historical precedents: a 1942 exhibition Marcel Duchamp created by winding a mile of twine around a gallery, as well as the rope and yarn sculptures of post-minimalists like Richard Tuttle and Fred Sandback and the tradition of empty-gallery exhibitions by Yves Klein or Douglas Huebler. Made by a woman, "Brain Damage" is perfect for our moment, though. Taut, tough and a bit neurotic, it's like a feminist homage and response to these historical — and historically male — gestures, standing boldly among them while suggesting in both words and materials the fragility and psychic damage of our own chaotic times. *MARTHA SCHWENDENER*

Annie Godfrey Larmon, “Critics’ Pick”, *Artforum*, 2017.

ARTFORUM



View of “Olga Balema: None of the beauty of the landscape can reach her pupils anymore,” 2017.
PARIS

Olga Balema

HIGH ART

1 rue Fromentin

October 19–November 23

Fifteen of Olga Balema’s modular foam-and-vinyl sculptures—bubble-gum pink, mint green, gender-neutral yellow—form a dissembled matrix spanning the rococo molding of this gallery’s walls. Composed to first draw the eye to discrete spaces and then cohere, the attenuated shapes recall the pixilation of a degraded image, producing the illusion of a big picture but offering up instead the reality of missing information. The works function not unlike Richard Artschwager’s “blps”—sculptural lozenges that reconfigure space into the viewer’s vertical and horizontal coordinates. But where Artschwager used smooth, inoffensive black vinyl or playfully teased and rubberized horsehair for his blips, Balema seems to have scavenged her stuff from a junkyard of late-’70s prom limos. They are seamy, distressed.

Artschwager’s materials were meant to hone the optic; Balema’s return the viewer from the optic to the body. A tear in vinyl forms a puckering, sallow mouth, like a cigarette burn in a school-bus seat (all works *Untitled*, 2017), while creases in the printed scales of pink faux-

alligator leather evoke the skin cells collected there. Like the artist's earlier biomorphic work, these objects are corporeal without being explicitly so.

In a second room we find suspended from the ceiling a double-ply length of transparent vinyl in orange and green. The effect is something like that of a filmstrip. Its final cel takes the form of a sculptural pocket. (A pillow sits just below this pocket, as though the cel had ballooned into space.) With each of these works, Balema returns touch—or memories of touch—to images. Recourse, perhaps, to the problem of her show's title: "None of the beauty of the landscape can reach her pupils anymore."

—Annie Godfrey Larmon

“Olga Balema at High Art”, *Contemporary Art Daily*, November 22, 2017.

Contemporary Art Writing Daily

Contact Support us Office Notebook

Wednesday, November 22, 2017

Olga Balema at High Art



(link)

In other words - images, unable to be tactile, an inability to make sensuality palpable irrupts strange fetishes: pornography must materialize its sensitivities by finding visual equivalents for touch. Textures which express similar reactions in viewers. You see it in taut inflated anime breasts, shiny PVC covered genitals, leather, sheers, frill, an entire wikipedia article about "breast physics." The ornate knots of bondage are totems to the practice. Art too in attempts to manifest materiality in what that cannot be touched must adopt hyperbolic visual equivalents. Bodies that photographs well.

Thomas Duncan, "Olga Balema", *Flash Art*, May 2017.

REVIEWS

Olga Balema

Hannah Hoffman / Los Angeles

The press release for "On the Brink of My Sexy Apocalypse," Olga Balema's sensuous Los Angeles gallery debut, offers little more than an anecdotal excerpt from Jean Genet's novel *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943). While this sliver of the author's gorgeous prose beguilingly portends the artist's preoccupation with fluidity, the show's title is more telling. Given the importance of liminal ruminations to Balema's practice, it is fitting that notions of porousness and entropy fluctuate throughout her environmental installation.

Central to this trifurcated exhibition is a large room, its flooring covered with pale-green linoleum, displaying several low-lying sculptures that include four mattress-like PVC bags filled with water in which sundry items of steel, fabric and paper are hermetically sealed. These works set in motion a course of invisible yet inevitable decay. It's hard not to consider them as bodies, their internalized systems enacting digestion, absorption and decomposition. Nestled nearby within a larger Day-Glo installation is the uncanny *A thing filled with evil streams* (2016), an oblong wooden block apparently supporting a partial rib cage replete with vertebrae. A battery-operated cell-phone motor vibrates within a niche in the sculpture's thorax, as if it were on life support.

The accompanying spaces further this current of corporeal allusion through several loose sculptures comprised of fabric, latex and steel. These skeletal works exude a poetic force more sensual than logical, though not without their own intelligences. Like all the other pieces in this materially thrilling installation, these works don't so much occupy space as invade it, as a parasite might attach to a host. And what has penetrated a surface must ultimately affect its interior.

by Thomas Duncan

Hippie Modernism

Berkeley Art Museum

First opened at the Walker Art Center in late 2015, "Hippie Modernism" now ends its run in the Bay Area, the cradle of the hippie. Yet the Berkeley Art Museum's version of the exhibition is substantially different; almost a quarter of the works, of local provenance, did not appearing in earlier iterations. There's blotter acid art, psych rock posters, and rich documentation of the 1970s proliferation of earthy, "hand-made houses" in the woods north of San Francisco — a kind of improvisational vernacular architecture of escape. A telling inclusion is the Community Memory Project, an early computer bulletin board for which a terminal was set up at a Berkeley record store in 1973 (later terminals would be installed at other sites) allowing people to send messages to the mainframe and to search and read others' stored messages. It's a fascinating chapter in the history of the personal computer, and yet this terminal, exhibited like a reliquary at the Berkeley Museum, suggests the distension of 1973's rhetoric of community into today's tech bromides.

Although the show features some excellent recreated installations, including Neville D'Almeida and Hélio Oiticica's *CC5 Hendrixwar/Cosmococa Programa-in-Progress* (1973), and videos, such as those by the collective Ant Farm, "Hippie Modernism" is most at home in the fields of architectural, graphic and product design. The curators' rather expansive understanding of "hippie" — spanning new sensibilities in media, optics and material; technophilia and back-to-the-earth escapism — aligns pretty easily with modernism's own famous capaciousness, encompassing varieties of futurism and primitivism. Instead, the unifying thread here must be sought in the context of the 1970s — the end of the postwar boom and crisis of capitalism — and a turn to lifestyle politics.

by Eli Diner

Faivovich & Goldberg

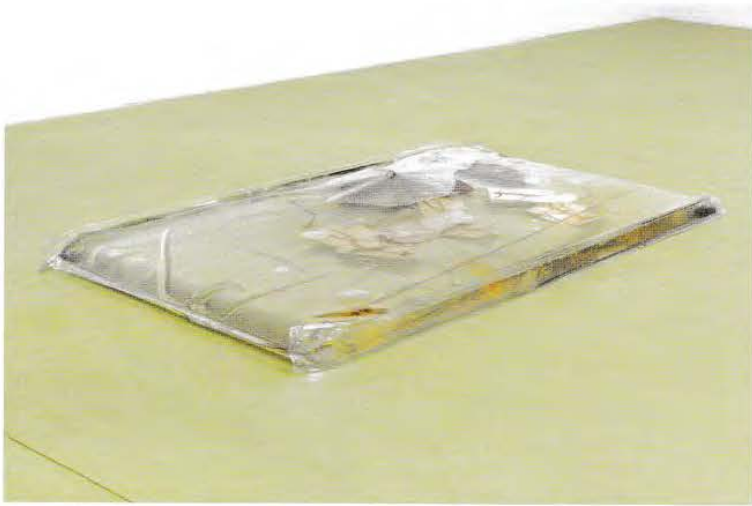
SlyZmud / Buenos Aires

Argentinian artists Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolás Goldberg began their project "A Guide to the Campo del Cielo Meteorites" back in 2006, unaware that it would eventually be featured in several American and European institutions. Their research into the region of Argentina where a rain of meteorites had fallen some four thousand years ago had the look of a hobby, but soon gave way to shows at Portikus in Frankfurt and then at Documenta 13. Now "Decomiso" (Seizure) brings their recent efforts back to a local audience, telling the story of 410 specimens of extraterrestrial rock seized by police in 2014.

A fifty-minute video in the main space documents the legal process of identifying the rocks, while a second venue nearby exhibits photographs of the rocks alongside reproductions of public documentation pertaining to their seizure. The film has a vivid flow and a bucolic tenor: a familial scene colored by country music shows officials sorting the fragments while laughing with one another. This provincial vignette brings intimacy to the peculiar activity of naming and photographing inanimate meteorite fragments — as if they were living individuals and not remnants of a prehuman, extraterrestrial past.

Yet "Decomiso" deals less with the celestial bodies themselves than with the process of classification of such objects. This is evidenced in the room full of shelves, photographs and legal documents that traps the viewer in its own blankness, and instills an administrative aesthetic that produces detachment. The gallery context is, perhaps inevitably, ill-suited to exhibiting an artistic research project surrounding a missing object. Thematically, the show is in keeping with their previous — rather more daring — shows to date. But its construction is very different. "Decomiso" turns Faivovich & Goldberg's project from research into memorabilia.

by Claudio Iglesias



From top, clockwise:
Chicago Women's Graphics Collective
In Celebration of Amazons (1974),
 screenprint on paper.
 Courtesy of Lincoln Cushing/
 Docs Poluli Archive and
 Berkeley Art Museum
 and Pacific Film Archive
 (BAMPFA), Berkeley

Faivovich & Goldberg
"Composition #31. Decomiso"
 Installation view at SlyZmud,
 Buenos Aires (2017)
 Courtesy of the Artists and
 SlyZmud, Buenos Aires

Olga Balema
become a stranger to yourself (2017)
 Courtesy of the Artist and
 Hannah Hoffman Gallery,
 Los Angeles
 Photography by
 Veli-Matti Hoikka

Sharon Mizota, "Bone, organs, scars: At Hannah Hoffman, a surreal and sculptural exploration of the body", *Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 2017.

Los Angeles Times

Review Bone, organs, scars: At Hannah Hoffman, a surreal and sculptural exploration of the body



Olga Balema's "A thing filled with evil streams," 2016. (Veli-Matti Hoikka / Olga Balema and Hannah Hoffman Gallery)

By **Sharon Mizota**

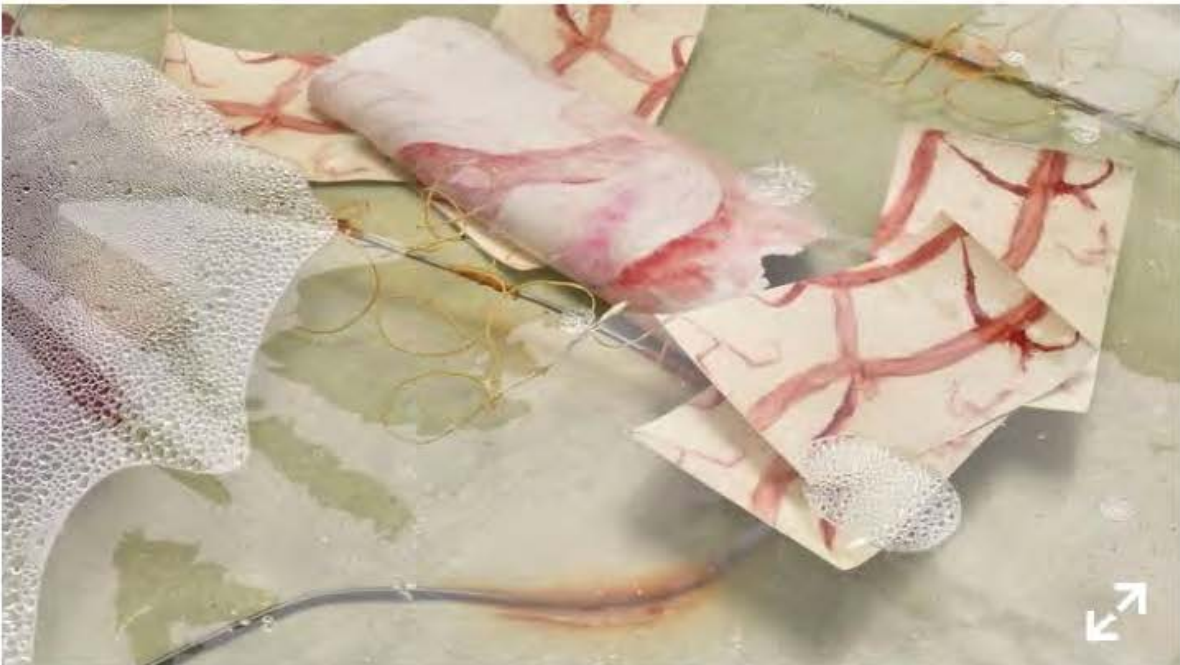
MARCH 2, 2017, 2:25 PM

The most obvious precedent for Olga Balema's exhibition at Hannah Hoffman gallery is the work of Eva Hesse, whose abstract, tactile sculptures make oblique references to corporeality: not just what bodies look like, but how it feels to inhabit one. Balema takes this proposition in a direction that feels both surreal and slightly scientific.

This latter quality is evoked in the pea-soup colored linoleum that covers the floor of the main gallery. Laid down in overlapping sheets, the surface evokes hospitals or other institutional spaces, complete with stains. Positioned on top of this flooring are four flat sculptures: clear plastic bags filled with water and other items. Although the bags are rectangular, they feel like bodies.



Olga Balema, "become a stranger to yourself," 2017. (Veli-Matti Hoikka / Olga Balema and Hannah Hoffman Gallery)



Olga Balema, "become a stranger to yourself," 2017 (detail). (Veli-Matti Hoikka / Olga Balema and Hannah Hoffman Gallery)

The work titled “become a stranger to yourself” is filled with images of what look like blood vessels or perhaps scars, and some indeterminate red masses that might be organs. Two similar works contain things reminiscent of bone or skin. And “fractures” features pale, curling ribbons that suggest nothing so much as tapeworms. These watery masses, like giant petri dishes, remind us that we are merely ambulatory bags of liquid.

In one corner of this room, sheets of iridescent paper, brighter than pea soup, spread across the floor and partially up one wall like a wave. Resting on the paper is a piece of wood that vaguely resembles a limb, draped with a sculpture of a partial rib cage. Next to this, slender, white, bone-like fragments are hooked up to battery packs so that they tremble. The effect is uncanny, like a disconnected but still buzzing nervous system: an automaton that is little more than a pound of flesh.

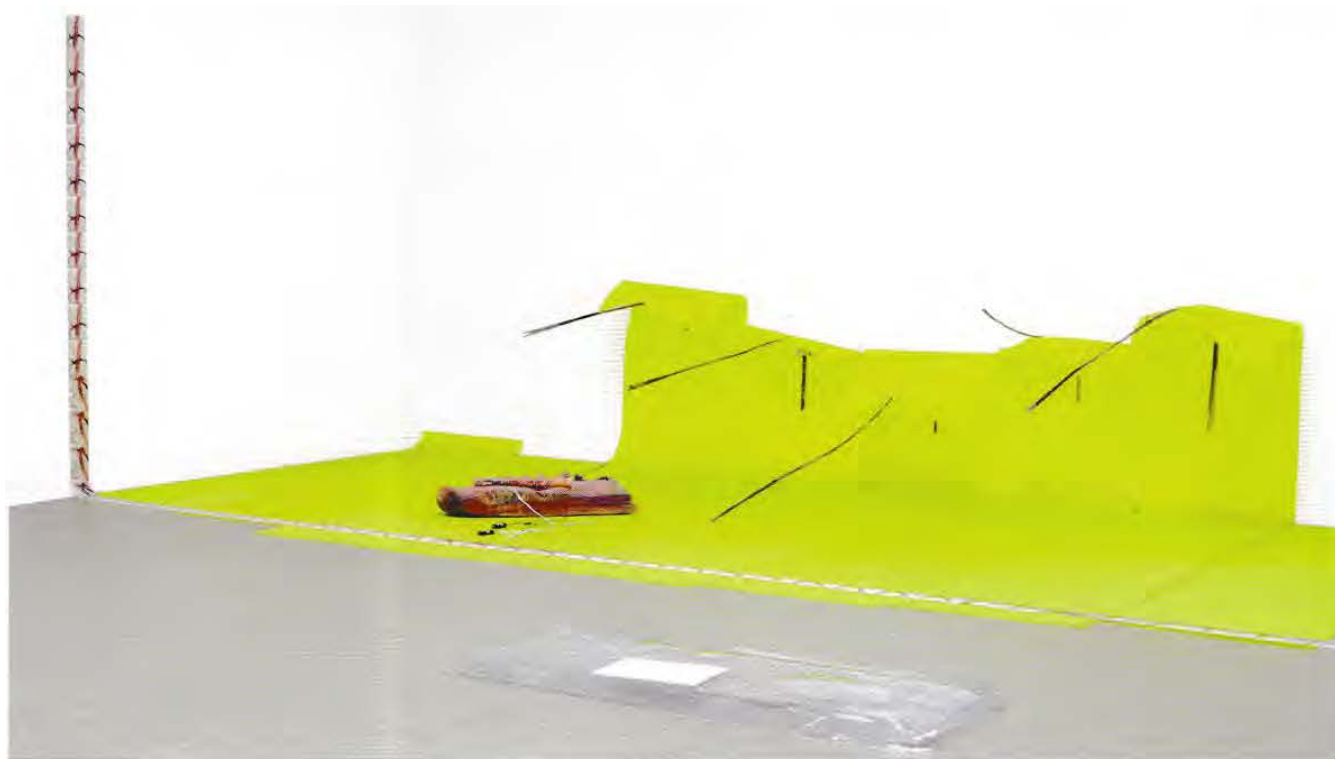


Olga Balema, "On the Brink of My Sexy Apocalypse," installation view. (Olga Balema and Hannah Hoffman Gallery)

Balema has also created a series of works consisting of fabric stretched over thin, metal armatures. These feel more obviously figurative and less interesting, although one of them, made of airy beige tulle, exhibits an unexpected sense of movement. Another features a pouch filled with water in which algae has been allowed to grow. This interpenetration — part bodily metaphor, part science experiment — feels like an accurate assessment of the way we’ve come to understand our own sagging mortality.

Hannah Hoffman, 1010 N. Highland Ave., L.A. Through March 11; closed Sundays and Mondays. (323) 450-9106, www.hannahhoffmangallery.com

Jonathan Griffin, "Olga Balema", *Frieze*, April 2017, 151.



OLGA BALEMA Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles, USA

I was laughing even before I entered the gallery. Beside the door to Hannah Hoffman, a notice announced the title of Olga Balema's exhibition: 'On the Brink of My Sexy Apocalypse'. There was certainly nothing laugh-out-loud funny in the show, but Balema's work has an electric material intelligence and sense of the unexpected that might be termed, inadequately, wit.

From the entrance, the main gallery appeared to glow snot-green. The effect was caused by a loosely laid floor of linoleum, itself an artwork titled *Return of the Repressed* (2017), and another floor piece made from steel rods, photographs and fluorescent-green holographic paper, called *Manifestations of Our Own Wickedness and Future Idiocy* (2017). In places, the paper and linoleum wrinkled, curled up the wall or was pierced with grommets as if it were meant to be hung. Faint stains described where puddles had dried: water that had presumably leaked out of the sculpture *Everyone Grows Relief* (2016), which still cradled a shallow pool in the latex-coated fabric that sagged from its steel armature.

Leakiness is a central preoccupation for Balema. Amongst her most

recognized works are the transparent, water-filled PVC sacks that she lays on the ground to act as containers for diverse sculptural and pictorial elements. Four such objects are arranged on the linoleum floor of 'On the Brink of My Sexy Apocalypse': *Drives*, *The Look*, *Fractures* and *Become a Stranger to Yourself* (all 2017). (Balema is excellent with titles, though they provide little in the way of narrative guidance.) In *Drives*, a steel rod (already vividly rusting) is threaded with five crude latex ribs, while a piece of emerald tulle fabric is pinned beneath. If this is a drawing of sorts, then its most emphatic mark is the condensation-filled air pocket beneath the PVC – a feature common to these works that makes them seem like fermenting science experiments, and a future conservator's nightmare.

Wetness, and the question of its containment, is often what makes Balema's sculptures feel alive. Our bodies, of course, are around 60 percent water, and *Drives* could be interpreted as constituting a supine human form. On flat pieces of latex floating at either end of the PVC sack, Balema has sketched faces; instead of corporeal completeness, however, her figuration here leads me towards a sense of the sculpture as a reliquary, or a grave containing decomposed parts. If that seems to contradict the idea of her work's aliveness, remember that even a rotting corpse is animated by myriad micro-organisms.

Another standout piece in the show was alive – or, rather, undead – in a different way. *A Thing Filled with Evil Streams* (2016) consists of a hunk of wood on which rests some latex vertebrae and ribs. Nuzzling against it are three white worms, made of modelling clay, which wriggle thanks to mobile-phone motors wired up to AA batteries. Sometimes, the gallerist told me, the disobedient worms vibrate out of position and have to be replaced.

This is part of what makes Balema's exhibition compelling: the knowledge that the installation will persist, buzzing away (or slowly leaking) even after you leave, like a posthuman landscape. The material unruliness of her work situates it on the brink of transformation – whether through apocalypse or entropy – and provides something akin to narrative tension. The gallerist revealed that the exhibition was based, in part, on a film Balema is making, set in a swamp. I cannot wait to find out what happens.

Jonathan Griffin

Olga Balema,
*Manifestations of
Our Own Wickedness
and Future Idiocy*,
2017, Rowlux paper,
steel, photographs
2.5 × 5.2 × 2 m

Quinn Latimer, "Olga Balema", *Artforum*, April 2015, 240-243.

Olga Balema, *Long Arm* (detail),
2013, latex, aluminum,
11' 5 1/4" x 4' 11" x 3' 3 3/4".

OPENINGS

Olga Balema

QUINN LATIMER

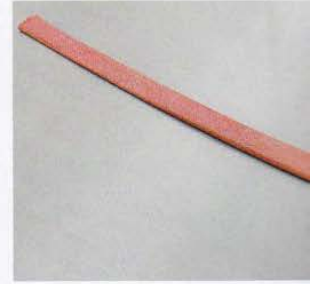




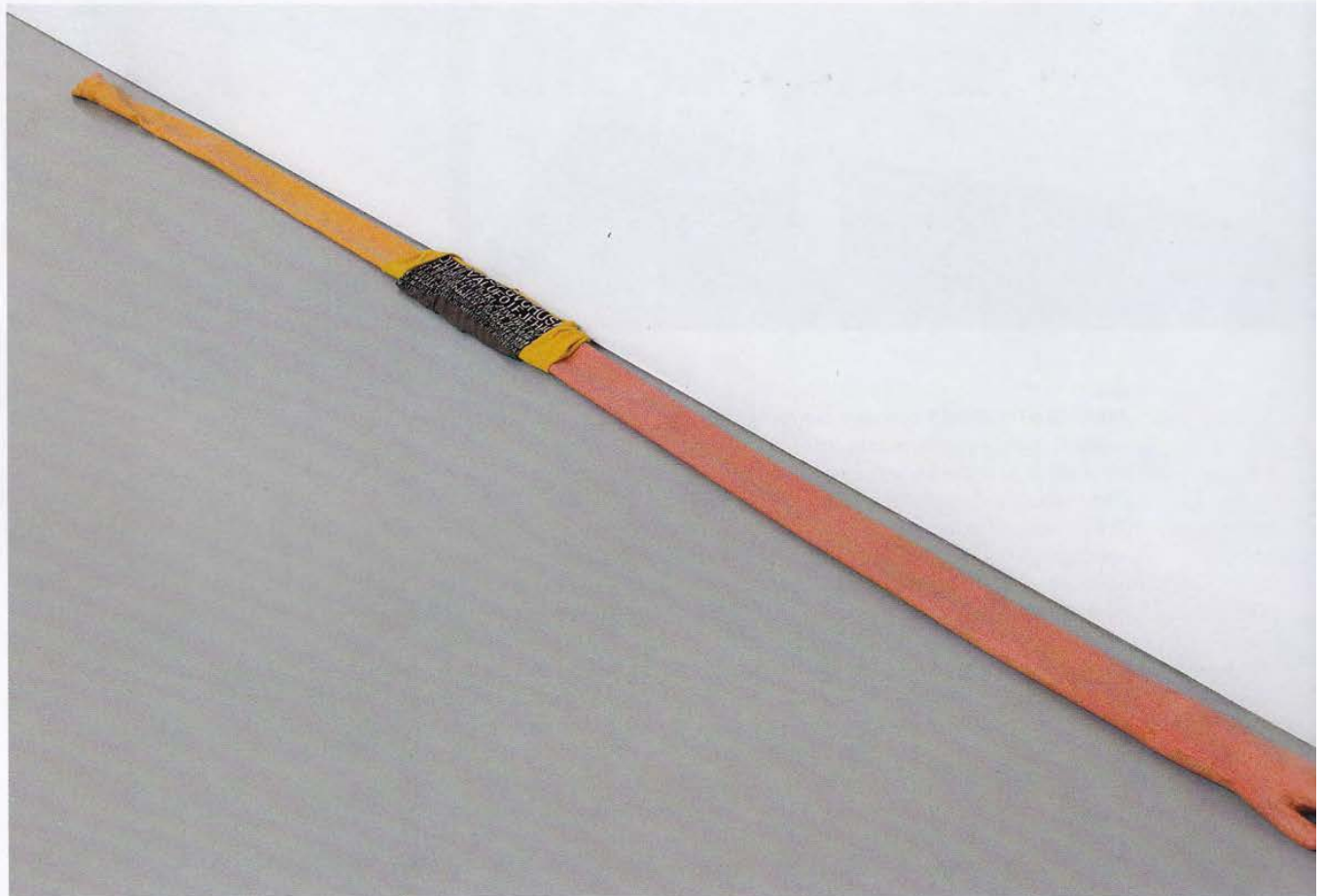
AN ARM STRETCHES across a concrete floor, a *Lonely Arm*, 2013. Salmon-colored, latex, it is not, in fact, an arm; it is a glove. Still, the allusion to an arm animates it, narrates its—what—well, technically *material* loneliness. In another white cube, another city, painted-metal and foam-and-latex biomorphic shapes—“Her Curves,” the exhibition’s title tells us, wittily—are leaned and loosed, approximating a brilliant, laconic apparatus, almost ergonomic. Matte and pastel or high gloss and jewel tone, the discrete sculptures shape and are shaped by the room. Like garments or stains or husks—material fragments at once body and chair and dress, all those things that might hold *her*—their minimalism is not predictably haunted by but *hunting* the human body (consider, for example, the narrative of a lonely glove scouring some surface for an arm to attend to).

The artist Olga Balema calls such works, her works, with their deft conflation of the interior and the exterior, “semiabstract.” On view at High Art, Paris, in 2014, they might be construed as totally abstract were it not for the figurative bent of their titles and the corporeal metaphors of their forms, which, taken together, call Balema’s works to “her” side. If one has only language to express the pointedly physical nature of these works, and the collusion between the lexical and the corporeal that intimately forms them—the desire to describe

View of “Olga Balema: Her Curves,” 2014, High Art, Paris. From left: *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (feeling natural)*, 2014; *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (more comfortable)*, 2014; *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (silver chasm and sunrise)*, 2014; *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (sunset)*, 2014.



Clockwise, from left: Olga Balema, *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (more comfortable)*, 2014, steel, foam, latex, pigment, hardware, 42 x 22 x 20". View of "Olga Balema: Her Curves," 2014, High Art, Paris. Foreground: *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (looking at a tree)*, 2014. Background: *Interior Biomorphic Attachment (feeling natural)*, 2014. Olga Balema, *Lonely Arm*, 2013, latex, 3 1/4 x 91 1/4 x 4 3/8". Olga Balema, *untitled (detail)*, 2013, PVC, water, steel, acrylic paint, chili peppers, concrete, 47 1/2 x 78 3/4 x 5 1/4". From the series "Untitled," 2013-. Olga Balema, *Long Arms with Letter Sweater*, 2013, latex, textile, 3" x 6 7/8" x 14' 1 1/2".



At once haptic and sealed off, Balema's works change over time, the materials shifting, decomposing.



View of "Olga Balema: What Enters," 2013, 1646, The Hague. Photo: Nico Feragnoli.

the body, in both text and space—then so be it, for one is always in language in Balema's work, called over to *its* side (my metaphor reaching again for the body, like the artist's long *Lonely Arm*). The language of art history, yes—her High Art show conjured the polymorphous perversity of a ménage-à-trois among Lynda Benglis's poured sculptures, Bruce Nauman's psychological cast fragments, and Alina Szapocznikow's Pop-inflected, very material feminism, while offering an art-in-the-age-of-the-Internet riposte to the "living brushes" of Yves Klein's *Anthropométries*, 1958–62. But also present is the lexicon in which we parse and picture and narrate the physical and psychic body—its contents and discontents. Consider how writing runs through Balema's work in her poetic press releases, which set the scene (of her concerns): "In a living room. / Legs crossed to form a point of departure, she follows the lines as they travel along biologically. / Surprised, a word spills from her mouth."

Born in Ukraine and based in Amsterdam and Berlin, Balema earned her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2009. Among these disparate sites, her concern with communication—and the imaginative, ideological, and material space between subject and object—likely emerged. Nevertheless, it's the body—literary, technological, biological, and largely female, it seems, and filled with desire—that illuminates Balema's work with a kind of philosophical consciousness that is rare, welcome. Her sculptures and paintings break down the predictable binaries of subject/object, matter/language, body/writing, instead

looping through and among them, nonhierarchically.

See "Body of Work," her exhibition at Galerie Fons Welters in Amsterdam in 2013, which featured a constellation of rusted-steel objects laced with white, wispy 3-D-printed textiles that stood out against them like gnomish signs; latex gloves conjoined with word-smeared sweaters; fountain-like buckets filled with soaked, text-strewn T-shirts; and prints on canvas communicating such unfluent, enigmatic sentiments as *I DREAMT I HELD YOU IN MY / AND I HUNG MY HEAD AND I / YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE, MY / BUT NOW YOU'VE LEFT ME, A / ND LOVE ANOTHER* (*You Are My Sunshine*, 2013). The etymology of the show was the cadence of the error-filled T-shirts the artist first saw in Shanghai—but that proliferate across the non-English-speaking world—adorned with text directly (mis)translated from Chinese. The strange, sad language that results cancels the clichés of the original writing—wonderfully—while suggesting a translation process that can't quite decode and compress the distance between the need to communicate and one's means, between culture and meaning, between representative models and individual bodies.

"The libido is defined as an energy of strange material consistency," philosopher Catherine Malabou writes in her essay "Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*":

It is often presented as a substance that is neither liquid nor solid but something in between. "Fluid" or, precisely, "plastic" are terms often used by Freud to characterize this type of amazing materiality. The

libido is sometimes compared to a river. . . . At other times, Freud uses the metaphor of protoplasmic liquid, which is a little thicker than sheer water. . . . The plasticity of the libido thus designates the double ability to cling to the object and to abandon it.

Why do I keep coming back to this passage when thinking about Balema's series of untitled floor pieces made since 2013, transparent rectangular plates containing water, concrete, and steel, among other materials? They were shown at 1646 gallery, in The Hague, in 2013, and paired by the artist with a passage from Vladimir Nabokov's 1924 story "*La Veneziana*," which ecstatically describes merging with the material qualities of paintings. The works' plastic packaging, which holds them together—modernist landscapes and speculative specimens of refuse both, Petri dishes all—glimmers and warps under the gallery lights. The abject compositions are watery orange or pink grounds; poles and fabric litter them, are suspended expertly within them. At once haptic and sealed off, the works change over time, the materials shifting, decomposing. Malabou writes, "The time of materiality would be prior to the time of pleasure." If there is a libido at work here, it is in the pleasure and pain of decay, and in that decay's framing. The sovereign bodies of Balema's works are mirrors to our matter, their silence beckoning forth our language to describe them, and us. □

QUINN LATIMER IS EDITOR IN CHIEF OF PUBLICATIONS FOR DOCUMENTA 14 AND THE AUTHOR OF *RUMORED ANIMALS* (2012) AND SARAH LUCAS: *DESCRIBE THIS DISTANCE* (2013).

Lucie Stahl and Olga Balema, "Olga Balema x Lucie Stahl",
Metropolis M, August/September 2015, 67-74

Lucie Stahl x Olga Balema

As circumstances would have it, one of them just moved into the other's house as a subtenant. But the reason they are conversing here is a certain affinity with each other's work, and especially the world which that work evokes.

By Lucie Stahl & Olga Balema

OLGA BALEMA

Olga Balema (1984) currently lives in the apartment of Lucie Stahl. She is maybe best known for works involving water that change over time, making the experience of her works different from day to day. She is represented in the Netherlands by gallery Fons Welters where her last solo show included, among other works, long latex arms and twisted, rusted metal sculptures.

LUCIE STAHL

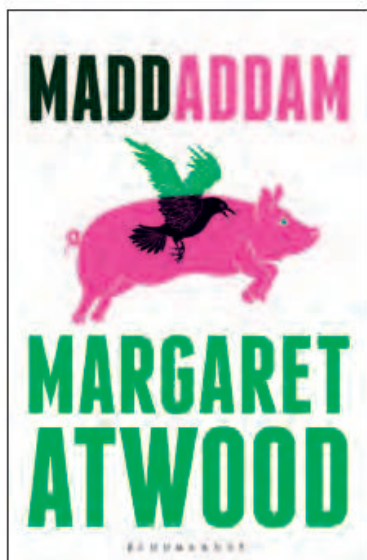
Lucie Stahl (1977) is currently living in London. Her works are critical and funny, confronting us with our consumerist approach towards the world. She is represented by, amongst others, *dépendance* in Brussels and Freedman Fitzpatrick in Los Angeles, where her most recent solo show included prayer wheels made from sun bleached beer cans.

Lucie Stahl: 'I recently got all my stuff out of Vienna and stored it in Berlin. It felt really old school to move all my belongings, to carry around all this actual material. It seemed somewhat redundant to hold on to all of that today. I despise having so much stuff, but I also miss having it around. As you know, I've been moving around constantly in the last three years, and it was weirdly substantial to be surrounded by all these things, by their physical presence. Since we both have a very physical approach to making works, it made me wonder if this is something you relate to. Also, you're currently subletting my apartment in Berlin so you're living with the things I left behind...'

Olga Balema: 'What you are describing seems a bit like a nightmare to me. I am kind of afraid of stuff, mostly because I have moved so much recently. I'm always subletting and living with other people's stuff. I think that I'm not so much afraid of stuff, as not used to it. I have moved

DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION

at least once every four years since I was seven. My favourite thing about staying in other people's houses is their book collections. I loved read-



LUCIE STAHL X OLGA BALEMA

ing Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* and recognizing small parts that may have influenced your works. The book talks about a time when most of the stuff is gone or not being produced anymore, but is being recycled to the max. The characters wear bed sheets as clothes, eat facemasks, and make coffee from twigs. I was curious if you consciously relate to works of fiction or if some ideas and images just

and maybe it's not important. The things that influenced me at the time were pretty dark and existential, but I think the show also had a humorous, positive side. I had just done a lonely road trip through the United States, from LA to NYC – I guess I had to prove something to myself. I wanted to set the show up like a walk-through of my trip, but also a very analogue idea of a video game, designed by someone

LUCIE STAHL: 'SEEPING IN' IS A PRETTY ACCURATE WAY TO DESCRIBE HOW VARIOUS TOPICS INFLUENCE MY WORK

kind of seep in and mix with your own ideas. I also had to think about the movie *The Stuff*. Have you seen it? It's about an amorphous, edible desert substance that the world becomes obsessed with, but it's actually a parasite that takes over the brain and turns its consumers into zombies.'

LS: "Seeping in" is a pretty accurate way to describe how various topics influence my work. *REN*, my show at Freedman Fitzpatrick in early 2014 was influenced by the Atwood trilogy, alongside other subject matter. I'm not sure anybody got that,

who has no idea how video games function. In the show, the trip led through heated, deserted landscapes, alongside sun-bleached cans and peepholes that entered into different realities – the office or actual life in the strip mall where the gallery is located, for example – and from there, into the cold, into isolation, solitude. Of course it had to end with a joke. But a sad one. The lonely Pinocchio mirroring himself in eternity.

'The title of the show, *REN*, is the name of one of the main characters in the books. In my head I mixed up the story of the books with a video

game called *The Last of Us*, which is also set in a post-apocalyptic scenario – humans get infested by this mutated cordyceps mushroom and turn into zombies. There are a few human survivors, including Ellie, the main character, whom in my head I sort of fused with Ren. Actually, the movie that you mention sounds a lot like it. Around that time, I had read an article in *The New Yorker* called 'Death Dust', about valley fever, a scary and dangerous disease caused by certain mushroom spores which damage people's organs. It only occurs in particular areas in California and Nevada. My best friend from high school who went to the US for an exchange programme and lived in the Valley for a year got infected, around '93 I think, and became really, really sick. She recovered, but it was devastating. I hadn't heard anything more about this disease until I read the article.

DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION

There is a huge prison in that area of Nevada, and lots of inmates – many of them incarcerated for minor things – become infected. A lot of them don't have health insurance. It is pretty bleak.'

OB: 'Wow, I read the article about Valley fever. It is scary that this mushroom occurs so randomly and that the spores move with the wind, turning breathing into a hazard. The most disturbing thing was that the presence of the spores was not disclosed to potential home buyers by the real estate developers in the desert, while minority populations, at whom the new low-cost housing developments were targeted, were most susceptible to infection. Also, the U.S. military considered to use the spores to develop a biological weapon in the 60's, and there is no vaccine for it. It really is like a horror movie. It makes me think about how uncontained our bodies are. They support so many other organisms, some beneficiary, some parasitic. In your catalogue, I came across a



Olga Balema, poster voor *Farming in Europe*, 2013-2014, koninkammer en zout op staal, 85 x 70 x 44 cm, courtesy Fons Welters, Amsterdam

LUCIE STAHL X OLGA BALEMA



Lucie Stahl, *Big Gulp*, 2014, 165 x 119 x 3 cm, courtesy de kunstenaar en Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles

couple of older posters that depict stomachs as well as stomach tables, which made me think about your work in relation to digestion, and made me read and interpret the posters as giant stomachs. Information and images are collected and digested in a kind of goo. The texts are also very kind of gutty or gutsy, words that have been swallowed. Everything is sealed up; the scans act like x-rays, showing the things the pictures chose to ingest.'

LS: 'Yes, I can see where the idea of the poster working as a digestion system is coming from, and in a way it's not far from how I set up a lot of the older poster works – they were often a big mash of various influences, objects, my own texts – sometimes related, sometimes not. Either way, all the things inside the frame have to cope with everything else. I like to think that the relation between the objects and texts is not hierarchical.'

'Coming back to the idea of "stuff". Since you live in my apartment, you're also living with your own work for the New Theatre play *Farming in Europe*, which is sitting in my room: a piece of bent steel with thin slices of cucumber stuck to it, which form letters that read EUROPE. I really like this piece because it's so simple, and yet it

evokes so many things – ridiculous former EU rules that were trying to regulate the shape of cucumbers or bananas; genetically modified crops; acid rain; bee disease...

'Tess Edmonson's press release for your recent show at Croy Nielsen came close to our shared Atwood reading list, don't you think? I think your work has just as much to do with these subjects as mine does, but maybe in a more abstract way. Your pieces that attach themselves to the ceiling, to the spaces, like mould, like organisms that take the space hostage. Abject-looking, substance-filled balloonish things, almost like living creatures. Cannibalism, genetically modified sheep that have pink mohairish fur, maggots... I'm assuming this is something you also relate to. The amazing thing about *MaddAddam* is that it is so literal, so close to what already exists, and yet the slight shifts, which sometimes are so ridiculous, also make it such an amazing vision. Men with huge blue penises, peeing in a circle; their urine creating a sort of protective boundary...'

OB: 'The apocalyptic end of the world and scarcity of food in the book pushed the protagonists beyond ideas of "morality" into complete survival mode, hence the passages about cannibalism. The body of work that I prepared for Croy Nielsen was titled *Cannibals*. The pieces were composed from older works in a way that they kind of fed on them to exist. Like microbes, the art works have to be fed too. I used soft PVC from the flat works and metal structures from the biomorphic attachment pieces. They are definitely kind of abject creatures eating away on themselves, but I think also very soft and sensitive. Reading the *MaddAddam* book, especially the very few passages about cannibalism, made me wonder how different the world would be if we humans were back on the plate. Whether we would have more empathy with our food, or if it would make us even more aggressive towards our environment. Also, the whole thing about Europe regulating the

shapes of bananas and cucumbers kind of blew my mind. So funny and sad at the same time. Here to the right of me, I'm looking at Europe, the cucumbers rusted and browned on the steel. I considered including similar works in the last show, titled *One re-enters the garden by becoming a vegetable*. "Europe" is a heavy word today, and I feel that dystopian narratives are becoming more and more a frame of reference for relating to the world. A further-developed sense of empathy would have served humankind well.'

LS: '(Chuckles) I am very much with you on this, though. The biggest struggle is to decide when and how to allow this sort of ethical question to enter the works. In general, I think I'm trying to ask questions but avoid answering them, because that would just be too embarrassing. I guess the only way I feel comfortable pointing in this direction is with a joke, sort of like the prayer wheels.'



Lucie Stahl, *Prayer Wheel (Sud Light 7)*, 2014, gevonden brúje, aluminium, courtesy de kunstenaar en Gó Marconi

'I'm enjoying all these different dietary movements, though, like veganism, flexitarians, paleo, etc., and how they almost become substitutes for religion. Alkaline water, for example, has an almost sect-like following; it's funny. Some of it is so

LUCIE STAHL X OLGA BALEMA



Olga Balema, *What Enters*, 2013, tentoonstelling in 1646, courtesy Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam/ 1646, Den Haag, foto Nico Feragnoli

absurd and removed, some of it of course makes sense. The really awesome thing about the *MaddAddam Trilogy* was how Atwood managed to intertwine all these ideas so perfectly. How the beauty industry relates to processed food and consumer culture; and prison spectacles to vegan sects... everything is interconnected. Lately a lot of processed foods, packaging, etc. appears in my works. Mainly soft drinks: Coca Cola, Big Gulp, Arizona Iced Tea.'

'Coca Cola versus Purified Alkaline Water. Governmental regulations that just show how almost impossible it is to compete with these massive corporations. Like New York's Mayor Bloomberg trying to ban the sale of oversized soft drinks, which was such a tragic and funny example.'

OB: 'Ha, I think it's interesting, the fervour with which pre-packaged foods were accepted. Progress, laziness, but maximized productivity. The desire to be as modern as possible. Now we are in a bit of a hangover from that, trying to make it right by going as far back as possible, with movements like the paleo diet. I wonder if there will be a movement that will aim to bring not only cuisine, but also lifestyle back to pre-agricultural times. I guess the apocalypse in *MaddAddam* was a bit of a forced version of that. But I would be curious to see the ad campaigns for a voluntary return to the hunter-gatherer days, which apparently were much more egalitarian and non-hierarchical (hint hint, Lucie).'

LS: 'Don't put ideas in my head...'

OB: 'But back to packaging, when I first moved to the West, pre-packaged foods were so interesting to me. Processed cheese, for instance, the way it was so neatly square and packaged into that particular cellophane. I still have a soft spot for it. I almost feel like these kinds of gooey, foamy, jelly foods could be to blame for the sensibility of my work, attracted as I am to the textural alien strangeness of it all. Maybe they are to blame for a lot of artists' sensibilities, these consumable abstractions. Chicken nuggets, for example, taking the chicken out of the chicken.'

LS: 'That makes sense, I feel like I really get the textural sensation of your work now. Don't know why I never put that together myself. I have a bit of a similar situation. When I grew up, corporate toys, excessive sweets with cool packaging, advertising, all of that was deemed "bad". My parents weren't fundamental about it, but it was a bit of an issue. We didn't have a TV until I was eight years old, so I had to binge-watch and catch up at my friend's places, which turned TV shows and advertised products into an even bigger attraction, a forbidden pleasure. Instead, my parents would take me to this theatre group for kids called GRIPS-THEATER in Charlottenburg. "Grips" is a slang word for having a brain. All their plays are left-wingish and critical with a lot of singing. Today it seems so funny, but

also awesome. It was so serious in its attempt to educate kids. Since we were already on the topic of bananas, one play, called BANANA, was about a Latin-American boy who is challenging a big banana corporation, sort of like Chiquita, by sing-

DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION

ing critical songs. I had the record version and was obsessed with it.'

OB: 'I'm wondering about the humour in your work, a lot of the texts you write are quite funny. I was reading the text for your show with the mummies and had to laugh out loud when thinking about having to squeeze past a pregnant mummy on the way to the bathroom and then having it wait for me to come out. Especially pregnant with 'planet Hillary'. I'm just wondering if it's a device that you use to kind of draw the works together, or to draw the viewers in, or maybe to process what is going on around you.'

LS: 'Humour, yes. It might be the most important ingredient of my work. That doesn't mean that I'm not serious, because I am. But the



Lucie Stahl, *GrKids Pick*, 2014, 119 x 168 x 3 cm, courtesy de kunstenaar en Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles

LUCIE STAHL X OLGA BALEMA

humour is a way to make it all bearable. I am dealing with all these semi-serious subjects in my work, and I don't want to be preaching. I was actually quite astonished to find out that we seem to share so many topics. Of course I could sense a certain realm of interest in your work, but since it's more abstract (I read that 'semi-abstract' is the term that you use), I wasn't sure if you're influenced more by the quotidian or by a more removed, theoretical spectrum. What about literature? There was something about Nabokov in a press release...

OB: 'The quotidian is very inspiring to me. I get a lot of input from the stuff around me. But most of my work comes together by simultaneously holding different thoughts in my head and then forming objects that try to contain all of them, the strongest subjects kind of sticking until the end... Maybe that's where the 'semi-abstract' (which is a term I once used in an artist statement in 2009, and that has been dug up again) comes from. For example, I think the flat water pieces came partially from living in the Netherlands and seeing all the puddles and canals. At one point, seeing some of my steel works outside in a puddle rusting away. But also wanting to make an object that was really

"difficult" and pointing to objects having an existence outside human consciousness. Then also going on a residency in China and experiencing environmental degradation on a level that was much more

advanced and much more palpable, while at the same time reading this Nabokov short story which describes a protagonist walking into a painting and feeling the texture of the paint engulf him, feeling what it's like to be inside a much more viscous world, where the air feels heavier.

'On the topic of stories, I was wondering how much or often you write and how the whole language aspect comes into being for you.'

LS: 'The language is a topic, but I have to admit it's one that I hardly think about anymore. I don't know when I started writing in English. Most of the stuff that I'm writing about, or used to write about earlier, is heavily US-American-themed. I spend a lot of time in Los Angeles and it would just be strange to write these German texts and maybe present them there, like I'm trying to be

so exclusive. Also, the English language is so direct and straightforward. Subject, object, male, female, human, animal, sun or trashcan, all get the same treatment, all get the THE. So equalizing. No gender

OLGA BALEMA: 'MOST OF MY WORK COMES TOGETHER BY SIMULTANEOUSLY HOLDING DIFFERENT THOUGHTS IN MY HEAD AND THEN FORMING OBJECTS THAT TRY TO CONTAIN ALL OF THEM'

attached. I like that. I don't write so regularly, unfortunately. I kind of write in bulks – sometimes I have stuff to say and I write it all down, it's all very important and urgent, and then the writing leads me to think about other stuff, makes me want to write more. I do everything in bulks though. There are also periods where I'm not doing much, just taking in. It's sometimes uncomfortable to accept the not-doing-anything as part of the practice, but maybe it's necessary.

'By the way, have you seen the Kurt Cobain documentary, Montage of Heck? I am thinking of it because it put a big emphasis on his constant stomach pains, which I think informed his output a lot.'

OB: 'I did see it! I thought it was interesting that he considered his stomach pains as a kind of talisman, protecting the music from losing its edge. I wonder if he was maybe actually gluten intolerant. It's somehow a touching relationship to the idea of suffering for your work.'

LS: 'Yes, I know the idea of suffering for your art is a really weird thing; artists being afraid to quit their habits because they think it would be detrimental to their practice. Interesting though, so you believe in gluten intolerance? I always file it under "made-up illness to support lifestyle choices".'



Olga Balema, *Threat to Civilization 2*, 2015, zacht pvc, staal, water, 47 x 99 x 94 cm, courtesy de kunstenaar en Cloy Nielsen, Berlijn, foto Joachim Schulz

Olga Balema
Kunstverein Nürnberg, Albrecht Dürer
Gesellschaft, Nürnberg
12.9 t/m 8.11.2015

Elvia Wilk, "Olga Balema", *frieze d/e*, December-February 2015, 108-109

FOKUS

Olga Balema

Zwischen den Körpern

Elvia Wilk

Her Curves. Warm Bodies. Body of Work. What Enters ... – Hängt man die Titel von vier neueren Ausstellungen Olga Balemas aneinander, zeichnet sich ein kontinuierliches Interesse deutlich ab: der Körper als eine zugleich in sich geschlossene und durchlässige Einheit. Anders gesagt: Es geht um die Einsicht, dass der menschliche Geist und das Selbst klar abgegrenzt sind, auch wenn Körper porös sind und in dauerndem Austausch mit ihrer Umwelt stehen. Und so setzt sich die in der Ukraine geborene, in Berlin und Amsterdam lebende Künstlerin mit der Spannung zwischen materieller Widerstandsfähigkeit und Zerbrechlichkeit auseinander. Dieses Anliegen manifestiert sich beispielsweise in formalen Erkundungen der Membran – einer, wenn auch sehr zarten, Schnittstelle zwischen Innen und Außen.

Zu ihren vielleicht bislang bekanntesten Werken zählt eine Serie von unbetitelten platten Plastikbeuteln, die an riesige Infusionsbeutel erinnern und mit Wasser und unterschiedlichen Objekten prall gefüllt sind. Die erstmals 2013 in *What Enters* in der Den Haager Galerie 1646 und jüngst auf der New Museum Triennial von 2015 gezeigten Werke sind faszinierend in ihrer Fragilität – man meint, sie könnten jeden Moment bersten – und ergreifend in ihrer Kombination eingepferchter Alltagsmaterialien: etwa rostende Metallteile, zerfasserter Stoff, Gartendekorationen, Kiesel und Chilischoten – jede Arbeit beinhaltet etwas anderes. Man könnte diese wie versteinert im Wasser liegenden Dinge, von denen sich viele im Verfallstadium befinden, als Sinnbild für all die Schadstoffe begreifen, die wir sowohl in unsere Körper aufnehmen als auch selbst in die Umwelt einbringen. Langsam vor sich hin rottend aber lösen sich diese Fremdkörper allmählich in ihrem Wirt auf. Die Objekte, die wie Fossilien in ihren Plastikbehältern liegen, erscheinen selbst wie Wesen mit einem Leben und Nachleben.

Auch andere Werke Balemas widmen sich den Transformationen, die Gegenstände mit der Zeit durchlaufen. In der Ausstellung *Body of Work* (2013) bei Fons Welters in Amsterdam rosteten Blecheimer – in die über ein dünnes Röhrchen permanent Wasser rann – langsam vor sich hin. T-Shirts und Leggings, bedruckt mit schlecht aus dem Chinesischen ins Englische übersetzten Texten, lagen in den Eimern oder waren über diese gespannt. Sie saugten sich stetig mit rostigem Wasser voll. Dieser langsame Prozess – eine Art Ruinierung durch Verfärbung – war eher melancholisch als spektakulär. Die Kleidungsstücke zeigten nicht nur, wie nutzlos sie ohne einen Körper sind, der sie lebendig werden lässt, sie ließen auch daran denken, wie der sterbende Körper wieder zu den Grundstoffen zerfällt, aus denen er besteht.

Skins

Her Curves. Warm Bodies. Body of Work. What Enters ... When listed together, the titles of four of Olga Balema's most recent exhibitions indicate a clear current in her thinking: the body as a simultaneously self-contained and permeable entity. That is, the awareness of the hard limits of human consciousness and selfhood despite the body's porousness, and its constant interaction with its environment. Consequently, the Ukrainian-born, Berlin- and Amsterdam-based artist often deals with the tension between material resilience and fragility. One way this manifests is through an investigation into the membrane – the interface, however slight, between inside and out.

Perhaps her best-known works to date are a series of untitled flattened plastic bags, resembling giant intravenous drips, filled taut with assorted objects and water. First shown in 2013 at 1646 in Amsterdam for *What Enters* and most recently at the 2015 New Museum Triennial, these works are compelling in their fragility – looking like they might pop at any moment – and poignant in their combinations of trapped everyday objects and materials. Differing each time, the materials have comprised pieces of rusting metal,

disintegrating cloth, garden ornaments, pebbles and chilli peppers. Immersed in water, these petrified items, many of which are disintegrating, might signify the pollutants we ingest into our own bodies and inject into the environment. And yet as they decay, the foreign objects slowly dissolve into their host.

Fossilized inside their plastic containers, the objects themselves are revealed as aging entities with a life and afterlife. Other works by Balema likewise harness the transforming of materials over time. Metal buckets shown in *Body of Work* (2013) at Fons Welters in Amsterdam slowly oxidized as water was fed continuously into the containers via a tiny tube. Inside the buckets or draped over them, t-shirts and leggings printed with badly translated Chinese-to-English texts increasingly dampened with rusty water. This slow process, here a form of degradation evinced by the changing pigmentation, was a melancholy rather than celebratory one. The garments signified not only the uselessness of the object without a body to animate it, but in turn suggested the return of the dying body to its material substrates.

Also in *Body of Work*, Balema displayed three handmade, coloured latex gloves with





2

Ebenfalls in *Body of Work* zeigte Balema drei handgefertigte farbige Latexhandschuhe an überlangen Ärmeln, von denen einer am Boden lag und zwei von der Decke baumelten – wie bei den T-Shirts schlaffe, leere Hüllen für offenkundig fehlende Glieder. Es gibt, würde Judith Butler sagen, keinen Körper ohne Genderbezug, und in Balemas Werk, mit seinen Bezügen zur Schönheitskultur und den Ängsten vor dem Älterwerden, kann man viele Arbeiten als Beschäftigung mit der weiblichen Körperlichkeit und ihrer Subjektivierung verstehen. Und doch ist das nur eine Facette eines breiter angelegten Interesses für die Interaktion des Körpers mit seiner Umwelt. Balemas Arbeiten sind, insofern sie den Körper in seinen genderspezifischen Aspekten behandeln, ohne seine Bedeutung darauf festzulegen, mit den Werken einiger ihrer Zeitgenossinnen (übrigens ebenfalls in Berlin ansässig) vergleichbar: Die *Puddle*-Serie von Marlie Mul, unansehnliche, auf dem Boden arrangierte künstliche Pfützen aus Sand, Stein und Kunstharz; die zu reliefhaften weiblichen Torsi geformten Plastikmembranen von Juliette Bonnevot; oder die drahtigen tragikomischen, quasiantropomorphen Skulpturen von Kasia Fudakowski.

Balemas am stärksten gestische und abstrakte Werke gehen über das Prinzip einer Membran als Umgrenzung hinaus: gewundene, teilweise mit Latex in kräftigen Farben beschichtete Schaumstoffplatten, die mit dünnen Stahlstäben an Wänden und Decken befestigt sind – flottierende Scheiben, wie Gewebeproben für die Laboranalyse. Jede trägt den Basistitel *Interior biomorphic attachment*, der durch Nummern oder spezielle Hinzufügungen in Klammern ergänzt wird, etwa (*looking at a beloved*), (*Sunset*) oder (*The return*). Arbeiten aus dieser Serie waren 2014 in der Gruppenausstellung *Puddle, Pothole, Portal* im New Yorker SculptureCenter, in Balemas Einzelausstellung *Her Curves* bei High Art in Paris sowie der Gemeinschaftsausstellung *Warm Bodies* mit Jonathan Baldock in der Kunstvereinigung Diepenheim zu sehen.

In der Ausstellung von Balema und Anne de Vries bei Michael Thibault in Los Angeles war das Körperinnere nach außen gestülpt, die Eingeweide lagen auf eine fast schon komische Weise offen. Eine Ansammlung von langen Innereien aus Latex (die an die langen Ärmel der Handschuhe in *Body of Work* erinnerten) stand für das Innenleben des Körpers, das hier keine Hülle hatte. Im Gespräch erzählte Balema, die Rede vom Bauch als Metapher für Gefühle habe sie fasziniert: „Spuck schon aus“, „dem Bauchgefühl trauen“, „Schmetterlinge im Bauch“ – Ausdrücke, in denen die Metaphorik den physischen Aspekt in den Vordergrund rückt. Der Körper steht immer dann im Mittelpunkt, wenn von Emotionen die Rede ist, die man anders vielleicht gar nicht zum Ausdruck bringen kann. Viele von Balemas Arbeiten beziehen Textfragmente mit ein, wiederum ein Verweis auf die Unzulänglichkeiten der Sprache, etwa in einer Serie von Drucken auf Leinwand mit Plattitüden über Liebe und Gefühl – der Text des Country-Songs *You Are My Sunshine* beispielsweise (*You Are My Sunshine*, 2013).

Bei solchen Texten mag man an die vergeblichen Bemühungen denken, angesichts der vorgeschriebenen oder klischeehaften Ausdrucksformen für Emotionen mit anderen Menschen – körperlich oder sprachlich – in Verbindung zu treten: Schnulzen oder Liebesgedichte. Wie kann man Traurigkeit zum Ausdruck bringen, ohne dabei schmalzig oder abgedroschen zu klingen? Balema sucht nach ernsthafter materieller Bedeutung in einer Zeit der Überfülle und der Wegwerfartikel, und sie versucht, innige emotionale Verbindungen darzustellen, während Gefühle selbst zu einem strategisch erzeugten Produkt geworden sind. Es ist letztlich die Membran zwischen Ernsthaftigkeit und Sentimentalität, die ihr ebenso empfindsames wie reflektiertes Werk zusammenhält.

Übersetzt von Michael Müller

distended arms, one of them resting on the floor and two dangling from the ceiling – like the t-shirts, these were limp, empty shells for noticeably missing limbs. As Judith Butler might say, there is no body that is not a gendered body, and in Balema's practice, with its references to beauty culture and anxieties of aging, many works could be construed as an investigation into female corporeality and its subjectification. However, this is only one facet of her broader preoccupation with the body's interaction with its environment. By addressing the body as gendered without reducing its meaning entirely to gender, Balema's work could be compared to some of her (incidentally also female, also Berlin-based) contemporaries: Marlie Mul's *Puddle* series, abject artificial puddles of sand, stone and resin arranged on the floor; Juliette Bonnevot's plastic membranes shaped into one-sided female torsos; or Kasia Fudakowski's wiry, almost-anthropomorphic comic/tragic sculptures.

Moving beyond the membrane-as-enclosure, Balema's most gestural and abstract works are flat, twisty sheets of foam, some coated with brightly coloured latex, affixed to walls and ceilings by thin steel rods. These are floating slices, like samples of tissue removed for lab analysis. Each with the root title *Interior biomorphic attachment* plus numbers or singular parenthetical addendums such as (*looking at a beloved*), (*Sunset*), or (*The return*), works from this series have appeared at SculptureCenter in New York in the group show *Puddle, Pothole, Portal* (2014), at High Art in Paris for the solo *Her Curves* (2014) and at Kunstvereinigung Diepenheim for a collaborative show with Jonathan Baldock, *Warm Bodies* (2014).

In a recent two-person show with Anne de Vries at Michael Thibault in Los Angeles, the body is turned inside out, becoming downright visceral, even comically so. A series of long, latex intestines (resembling the long-armed gloves in *Body of Work*) represent the body's plumbing without its shell. Balema recently told me she's intrigued by the metaphor of the stomach when talking about emotions – 'spill your guts', 'trust your gut', 'butterflies in your stomach' – using these linguistic references to highlight the physicality of such metaphors: the enduring centrality of the body when talking about emotions that may in fact be inexpressible otherwise. Many works incorporate fragmented text to further allude to language's shortcomings, such as a series of prints on canvas with phrases bearing platitudes of love and emotion, for example the lyrics to the country song *You Are My Sunshine* (*You Are My Sunshine*, 2013).

Texts like these evoke the sometimes futile pursuit of human connection – physical or linguistic – in the face of prescribed or clichéd routes of emotional expression: cheesy songs or love poems. How can sadness be communicated without becoming saccharine or trite? Balema searches for sincere material meaning in a time of overabundant, throwaway objects, and pursues the representation of intimate emotional connection when affect has itself become a manufactured product. The membrane between sincerity and sentimentality is ultimately the one holding her sensitive, self-aware work together.

1
How it feels
I and II
2013
Plastic box,
steel, hose,
water pump
and textile
101 × 47 × 80 cm

2
Top:
Untitled, 2014
PVC-foil,
water, steel,
plastic foil,
latex, sticker,
googly eyes and
acrylic paint
2 × 1.2 m

Bottom:
Untitled, 2014
PVC-foil, water,
steel, plastic
foil and
acrylic paint
2 × 1.2 m

Installation view
nature after
nature
Kunsthalle
Fridericianum
Kassel
2014

Chris Sharp, "Olga Balema", *CUR.A. Magazine* (Issue 20),
165-167

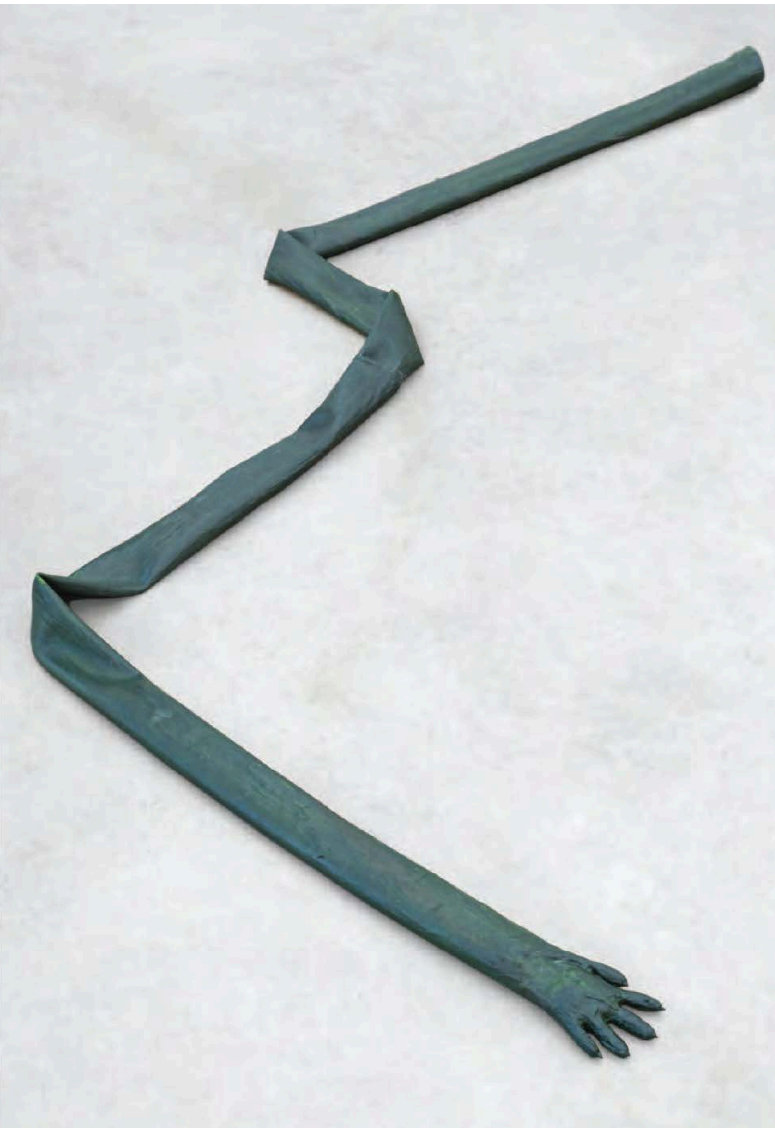
OLGA BALEMA by Chris Sharp

Much has been made of Olga Balema's relationship to such binaries as interior and exterior – this binary being something the Ukrainian-born, California-educated, and Berlin-based sculptor deftly does away with in her appreciably formless sculptural practice. Various cannibalistic, membranous, shell or skin-like, the work is known to use and take on a heterogeneity of materials, procedures and forms. These range from rusting steel and textiles to elongated latex gloves to flat, transparent sacks of water filled with disintegrating objects. Strangely perverse and weirdly, if theoretically erotic (the perverse, at least formally speaking, is always erotic), her works often refer to the body, the female body in particular ('her' being a pronoun which figures a lot in titles), and its supposedly isolated relationship to the immediate world around it. She has been known to show and is often grouped with what are known as post-internet artists, but while the production of some of her peers might sit quite comfortably within this alternatively celebrated and reviled category, hers, I would argue, does not. This is due to two main but interrelated reasons. One is that nothing about this work, neither materially nor conceptually, seems to privilege contemporaneity as an automatic, (non) critically autonomous value in and of itself, as if the mere identification and representation of the contemporary were some great, aesthetic achievement (even Warhol, diva of contemporaneity, understood the importance of transformation, no matter how slight). And secondly, her sculpture is not only historically aware of a tradition of sculpture as such, but also actively engages and contests it.

Decidedly, if doubly transformative, Balema's engagement can be perhaps most obviously and immediately perceived in the 'dialectical' quality of her work. By dialectical I mean in the sense used by Robert Smithson, who deployed it to valorize the mutable qualities of certain works of art, which are given to some kind of evolution, organic or otherwise. From the rust of watered steel and textiles to the disintegration of various materials, such as cloth, garden ornaments and chili peppers inserted inside, broad, flat water-filled sacks, decay or deterioration seems to be the dominant dialectical mode of this work, in so far as it does evolve. Traditional notions of sculpture may be characterized by many things – even Serra's monoliths are subject to rust – but a degradative instability combined with a comparative fragility (e.g., puncturable sacks of water) are not common among them. As such, there is something at once anti-sculptural, in so far as it is mutable and therefore impermanent, and consummately sculptural about what Balema does. To the pedigreed trifecta of Lynda Benglis, Bruce Nauman and Alina Szapocznikow identified by Quinn Latimer in her April 2015, Artforum Opening on Balema, I would add the likes of Eva Hesse, by virtue of the pseudo-organic and membranous quality of her work, and Smithson himself as a die-hard dialectician.

Of course, such associations are bound to get caught up in more conventional, or one could even consider classical forms of theory, such as body without organs or, say, *l'informe* – neither of which are irrelevant to the topic at hand (although with regard to Balema, it is perhaps more pre-





Long Arm 2, 2015, latex, plaster and latex, 8 x 415 x 11 cm. Courtesy: Croy Nielsen, Berlin. Previous page: Interior biomorphic attachment (more combinations), 2014, latex, latex, pigment, 108 x 33 x 35 cm. Courtesy: Croy Nielsen, Berlin and High Art, Paris (p. 163)

cise to speak of organs without bodies). But what interests me more at this point is the many allegations of *soi-disant* eroticism leveled at Balema's objects. Just how is this work erotic? And what does that mean in this context? Well, first of all, as alluded to at the beginning of this text (interior/exterior), questions of permeability, porosity, and entering are among the artist's primary preoccupations. Interestingly, while varying degrees of permeability can be identified in the fact of being human (e.g., food, air, etc.), there are basically only two cases when other human beings consensually enter our bodies: sexually and medically. So either in a state of desire or illness – states which, it goes virtually without saying, share a similar threshold of unreason in so far as both are liable to entail temporary departure from one's senses. It is perhaps no coincidence that Balema's sculptures seem to conflate these two states, rendering them all but indistinguishable from one another. Having already been described as "giant intravenous drips" by Elvia Wilk in her *Frieze d/e* focus issue 19, May 2015 on the artist, these bladder-like sacks, and their more recent counterparts, *Threat to Civilization* in her 2015 exhibition *Cannibals* at Croy Nielsen, whose forms have gone in a more biomorphic yet corporeal direction, possess a patently ailing, if agonizing character. Never mind that they are on the ground and in some cases, behind white curtains (hospital curtains?) as if they had fallen out of a nearby hospital bed, their sallow liquid interiors are decidedly bilious. If they are surrogate bodies, they are sick bodies. While not immediately obvious, Balema's glove works, such as *Long Arm* (2013), an eleven-foot long latex and aluminum patina-green glove, wields an intestinal quality, as if it could enter great lengths. And although its form clearly resembles a cleaning glove more than, say, a surgical glove, it is nevertheless inherently prophylactic, protective, and consuming.

Finally, to open one more can of theoretical worms, the last elephant, at least to my knowledge, standing in this room is *abjection*. However, I hasten to add, not necessarily in the Kristevan sense, but rather that of Bataille as filtered through Rosalind Krauss. In "Informe' without Conclusion", a kind of coda to the eponymous exhibition, Krauss takes on the term as applied by Laura Mulvey to the work of Cindy Sherman and responds with her own Bataillean interpretation of abjection. Interestingly, at one point she writes:

Well, as Bataille [...] shows us, it would be a matter of thinking the concept [abjection] operationally, as a process of "alteration," in which there are no essentialized or fixed terms, but only energies within a force field, energies that, for example, operate on the very words that mark the poles of that field in such a way as to make them incapable of holding fast the terms of any opposition.¹

Of course, this merely loops back into her and Yve-Alain Bois's battle axe of *Informe* (In seeking to define it, Bois writes, "It is neither the 'form' nor the 'content' that interests Bataille, but the operation that displaces both these terms"), and this in turn loops back to the beginning of this text and the logic of binaries. Given the artist's preoccupation with the erasure of the boundaries between interior and exterior, self and other, by way of, say, cannibalism, or even the collapse of the so-called opposition between form and content, it could be said that Balema's consistent dissolution of such traditional binaries impinges pretty square upon the territory of the abject.

1. Rosalind Krauss, "Informe' without Conclusion", *October*, vol. 78, Autumn, 1996, p. 98.
2. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Introduction: The Use Value of 'Formless'*, in *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 15.