Isa Genzken 75/75

EN

Nationalgalerie
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

NEUE NATIONALGALERIE

Biography

Isa Genzken is widely known for her seminal contribution to sculpture, whereby her practice at the same time encompasses photography, painting, collage, and film. By making loose reference to such movements as Constructivism and Minimal Art, and by engaging in an open and critical dialogue with modernist architecture, Genzken scrutinizes the way in which common aesthetic styles illustrate and embody contemporary political and social ideologies. She creates her work from everyday experience, combining seemingly disparate materials to form unexpected, new objects.

Born in 1948 in Bad Oldesloe, Germany, Genzken studied visual art, art history, and philosophy in Hamburg, Berlin, and Cologne before completing her studies at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 1977.

In the course of her career, Genzken has become a major artist of considerable influence. Her work has been the subject of numerous important museum exhibitions, including a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2013 along with solo and touring exhibitions at Kunstmuseum Basel (2020), the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf (2021), Kunsthalle Bern (2019), the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (2016), the Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt (2015), the Stedeljik Museum Amsterdam (2015), the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2014), the Dallas Museum of Art (2014), the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg (2014), Museum Ludwig in Cologne (2009), and the Whitechapel Gallery in London (2009), to name only the most recent.

Her works have been given a prominent place at international biennales and in international group exhibitions such as documenta (1982, 1992, and 2002), the Skulptur Projekte Münster (1987, 1997, and 2007), and the Venice Biennale (1982, 1993, 2003, 2007, and 2015), where she represented Germany in 2007.

In 2017, Genzken was awarded the Goslarer Kaiserring by the City of Goslar, and in 2019 she received the Nasher Prize of the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas.

In 2023, the Neue Nationalgalerie is taking the occasion of Isa Genzken's 75th birthday to honor her with a comprehensive sculpture exhibition. For the first time, her work is being shown in dialogue with the iconic building designed by Mies van der Rohe.

Wolfgang Tillmans
Isa in her studio, 2002

Isa Genzken 75/75

"In my life, I've always been concerned with fluidity and opposed to rigidity. That's been automatic – I've never had to think about it."[1]

Since the 1970s, Isa Genzken has succeeded in creating artworks that give us a different perspective on the world, that question what we take for granted, that spur us to think our own thoughts while rejecting all pigeonholes, that are consistently and sparklingly one of a kind. Her complex work is in constant movement, constant flux. Stasis is not an option, and through her work she always finds new ways of alarming and moving her viewers.

Genzken's creative work is unpredictable; it is also as fascinating as it is perplexing, playful, and unfailingly inviting. "If you walk around my works and pay attention to the scenery, something different always emerges and you can always discover something new and sympathize with it."[2]

Despite the heterogenous nature of Genzken's oeuvre, overarching themes can be discerned in her series of works. For one thing, the artist observes the diversity and complexity of everyday objects and things and brings them together on an equal footing: everything becomes sculptural material, and she infuses it all with new energy. Although the materials she uses seem familiar, the way they are combined is unusual. Using windows, transmitters, radios, and symbols like the rose, the artist initiates a conversation with the outside world. From the outset, Genzken worked to develop a sculptural narrative that plays with size, scale, monumentality, and the viewer's imagination. Her critical exploration of societal, political, historical, and current issues began, at the latest, with her series *Empire/Vampire*, created after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

In her work, Genzken is never detached from what is going on around her; she approaches diverse topics intuitively, generating her own conceptions and images. Particularly striking is her exploration of space and her genuine passion for architecture and cities – especially New York and Berlin.

With this exhibition, a wish of Isa Genzken's has come true: in honor of her 75th birthday, 75 of her sculptures are appearing for the first time in a direct dialogue with Mies van der Rohe and his architectural monument, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, which is particularly close to Genzken's heart. This exhibition is a gift to Genzken, but also – and especially – to Berlin and all visitors.

Klaus Biesenbach
Lisa Botti

[1] "Diedrich Diederichsen in conversation with Isa Genzken", *Isa Genzken*, London: Phaidon Press 2006, p. 21.

[2] Ibid, p. 15.

An exhibition of the Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
made possible by the Freunde der Nationalgalerie.

Ellipsoids and Hyperboloids

Isa Genzken honed her sculptural sensibilities while studying at the art academy in Düsseldorf between 1973 and 1977. At the time, she was heavily influenced by American Minimal Art.

Her *Ellipsoide* (Ellipsoids) and *Hyperboloide* (Hyperboloids), which she created between 1976 and 1982, are characterized by extremity, excess, and a pushing of boundaries, as well as an aspect of hybridity. Her ellipsoid pieces are long, extremely slender wooden sculptures measuring six to twelve meters and resting on the floor at a single point. Her hyperboloid works are their companion pieces; their basic shape consists of a concave line, and they touch the floor at two points. While both groups of works take orientation from Minimalism, they call to mind different associations through the esthetics of their materials: "Of course, it was exactly this 'content' that I wanted to bring back into the ellipsoids so that people would say, 'It looks like a spear', or a toothpick, or a boat. This associative aspect was there from the very beginning and was also intentional, but from the viewpoint of Minimal Art it was absolutely out of the question and simply not modern." [3]

Working with a physicist at the university in Cologne, Genzken calculated the precise diameter and measurements of the *Ellipsoids* and *Hyperboloids* using a computer: "They were tremendously complicated to produce in terms of craftsmanship. [...] People have always thought they were machine-made, but I wouldn´t have been able to afford to get them produced in an aeroplane plant or wherever you can have things like that made. I was also very proud of them because they helped me achieve a level of craftsmanship that many of my American colleagues no longer have. With the exception of my outdoor sculptures I´ve always done everything by hand anyway." [4]

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

Blau-grau-gelbes Hyperbolo „Elbe", 1981

World Receiver

In 1979, Isa Genzken began a series for which she photographed advertisements for hi-fi systems. She hung these photos in an exhibition with her *Ellipsoids* and *Hyperboloids*. "When I photographed these ads for stereo systems, I thought: everyone's got a tower [stereo] like that at home. It's the newest, most modern thing there is right now. So a sculpture must be at least as modern and has to be able to bear up to that. At that point I hung the photographs on the wall and placed an *Ellipsoid* on the floor and thought: the *Ellipsoid* has got to be at least as good as the advertisements. At least as good. That's how good a modern sculpture has to be." [5]

The original hi-fi system "Weltempfänger" (World Receiver) of 1982, with which she receives news and music from all over the world, still stands in Isa Genzken's studio. Beginning in 1985, Genzken created concrete reconstructions of its body, to which she added real antennae to signal a seeking and receiving of a connection to the outside world. It was Joseph Beuys first and foremost who conceived the idea that a sculpture can be pervaded by a kind of energy and is able to send signals to a receiver much as a transmitter does. With this reference, Genzken opposed not only Modernism but also the material reduction found in American Minimal Art.

Just as Genzken's *Fenster* (Windows) are connectors between inside and outside, the *Weltempfänger* (World Receivers) constitute linking elements between transmitter and receiver. "My antennas were also meant to be 'feelers', things you stretch out in order to feel something, like the sound of the world and its many tones." [6]

Her work *Mein Gehirn* (My Brain, 1984) offers a very personal connection. It visualizes her links to the outside world like a self-portrait.

[5] Isa Genzken/Wolfgang Tillmans, "Isa Genzken: ein Gespräch mit Wolfgang Tillmans", *Camera Austria*, 81, 2003, p. 8.

[6] "Diedrich Diederichsen in conversation with Isa Genzken", *Isa Genzken*, London: Phaidon Press 2006, p. 25.

Top left: *Mein Gehirn*, 1984; top right: *Weltempfänger*, 1982; below: *Weltempfänger*, 1988-1989

Plaster Sculptures, Concrete Sculptures, Windows, X

Isa Genzken, well-known since the late 1970s for her elegant and colorful wooden sculptures as well as photographs of ears and hi-fi systems, surprised the art world in the mid-1980s as she turned to a new material: plaster. First, she completed smaller plaster sculptures to which she added wood, metal, paper, and glass. With their improvised, cavernous shapes, these works contrast sharply with the perfected elegance and technical precision of her wooden *Ellipsoids* and *Hyperboloids*, and are devoted, instead, to the world of everyday objects, for example *Müllberg* (Garbage Dump, 1984).

Over time, a change in shape occurred and she created tall, slender, vertical figures such as *Institut* (Institute, 1985), which call to mind modern high-rise architecture. The simple cubic shapes and nested structures look like fragments or casts of façades pushed together. What results is an interplay between architecture, zeitgeist, and everydayness.

In 1988, Genzken completed her first concrete sculptures. They elicit associations of cityscapes and the architectural style of the 1950s and 60s – for example, with the Berlin building Unité d'Habitation by Le Corbusier. The artist does not portray any architecture, however. In their tension between departure and decline, her sculptures ask that we observe modern architecture anew and with a differentiated gaze. Through the contrast between the hardness of the material and the fragility of the individual elements and the delicate plinths, they assume a powerful presence.

In 1990, she began to cut openings in her concrete sculptures and conceived of a series that she titled *Fenster* (Windows). Between 1992 and 1993, the exhibition *Jeder braucht mindestens ein Fenster* (Everyone Needs At Least One Window) went on tour, with stops at the Renaissance Society Gallery in Chicago, Frankfurt's Portikus, the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, and the Lenbachhaus in Munich, for example.

Especially here at the Neue Nationalgalerie, with its translucent glass façade and grid-patterned stone floor, where the interior of the building expands effortlessly to the outside, there is an inversion of interior and exterior, private and public sphere. In this space, Genzken's *Windows* enter into an inimitable dialogue with the architecture of Mies van der Rohe.

In 1991, Genzken used a synthetic resin (epoxy) for the first time – a translucent material that leaves the steel skeleton of the structure visible. Further *Windows* were completed, such as folding screens like *Venedig* (Venice, 1993) and X (1992). →

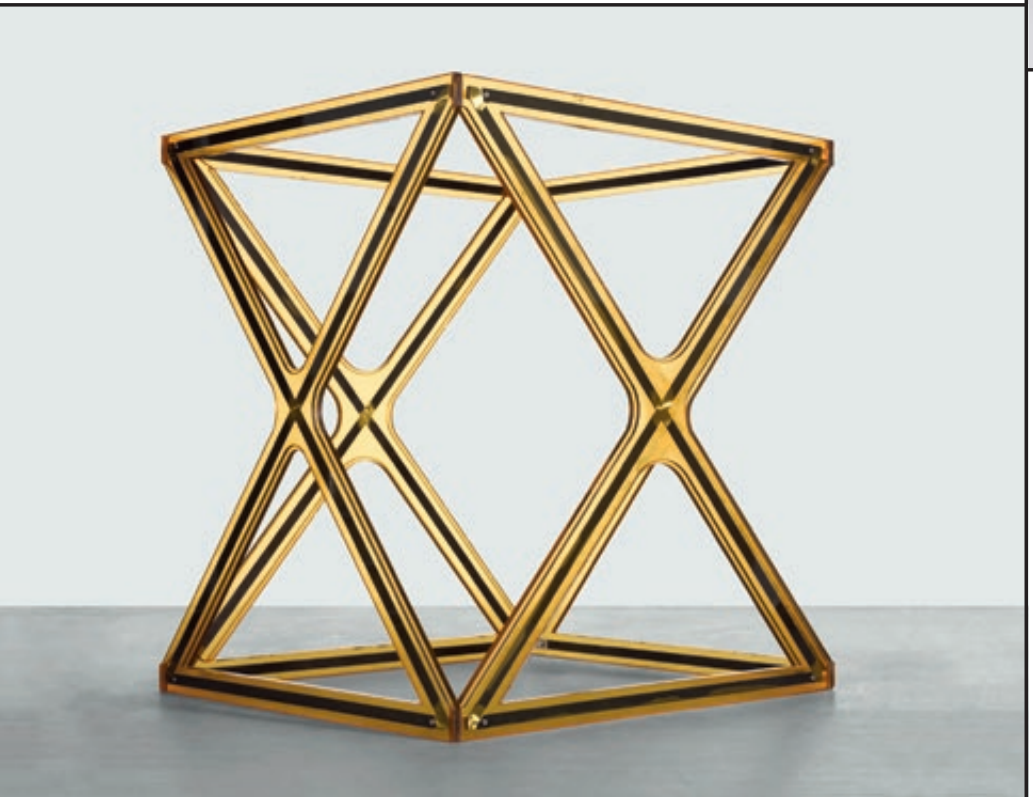
Top: *Müllberg*, 1984; bottom left: *Fenster*, 1990; bottom right: *Institut*, 1985

The folding screens like *Venice* as well as the large *Window* of 1992 have no plinth but, rather, remain upright on the floor, solely courtesy of their multiple parts connected by hinges.

X (1992) makes reference to the façade of the John Hancock Center in Chicago, built in the late 1960s. A new building technique was used in its construction: in order to keep the interior open and free of supports, all load-bearing components were moved to the shell. Genzken was attracted by the bold and almost titanic idea of having a steel skeleton made of crosses. She exhibited her sculpture *X* for the first time at documenta IX.

Lampe (Lamp, 1994) stands in Genzken's tradition of creating proximity to functional, everyday objects (windows, screens, engine hoods, radios). However, her lampshade, made of thick, yellowish epoxy, casts only a minimum of light. It is less the functioning of the objects that is of interest to the artist than the idea behind them: windows as openings, folding screens as coverings, lamps that reveal as they illuminate.

In 2005, Genzken added a series of airplane window panels to her *Fenster*: *Ohne Titel (Flugzeugfenster)* (airplane window) is painted in multiple colors and, with its lines like sunrays that surround the opening, recalls large eyes and lashes. The work subverts our understanding of windows that look out into the world: here they look back and observe the viewer.



Left: *X*, 1992; top left: *Ohne Titel (Flugzeugfenster)*, 2005; top right: *Venedig*, 1993; right: *Lampe*, 1994

Rose

Isa Genzken created her first rose in 1993 for the park-like gardens of Villa Schriever in Baden-Baden, Germany. Eight meters in height, its monumental presence may even be perceived as monstrous. The landscape around it is rendered diminutive; the proportions are inverted. “[The rose] has something to do with the notion of communication: it is as big as possible, but still just as delicate as I could make it. And it takes up as little space as possible.” [7]

Roses have sentimental and symbolic meaning – for example, as symbols of love, beauty, purity, but also of socialist solidarity. In 2009, Isa Genzken said: “The rose seems to be an international symbol; after all, there’s no other flower that brings people such incredible joy when they see it.” [8]

[7] “Diedrich Diederichsen in conversation with Isa Genzken”, *Isa Genzken*, London: Phaidon Press 2006, p. 27.

[8] Kasper König and Isa Genzken, “Außenprojekte”, *Isa Genzken. Sesam, öffne dich!*, exh. cat. Museum Ludwig, Cologne/Whitechapel Art Gallery, London/Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König 2009, p. 97. Translation by Leonhard Unglaub and Logan Kennedy.

Pink Rose, draft, 2016/2023

Ground Zero

For the exhibition *Ground Zero* (2008), Isa Genzken created seven skyscraper models to counter the “impending design catastrophe and [the] national hullabaloo around it.” [9] The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 brought about worldwide trauma, and in very concrete terms, opened a large vacant lot when the two towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed. Genzken devised architectural proposals for new structures for *Ground Zero*, just as she had done with *New Buildings for New York/Berlin*.

All models are mounted on MDF board with castors. The work *Hospital*, shown in this presentation, is mobile in two respects: the bar cart stands on a furniture dolly, which results in stacked instability and twice the uncertainty.

[9] *Außenprojekte*, exh. cat. Galerie Buchholz, Berlin: Galerie Buchholz 2020, p 125.

Ground Zero – Hospital, 2008

Columns/Stelae

Between 1994 and 2003, Genzken created a series of sculptures in the form of columns or stelae that rise from the floor to at least eye level. The surfaces of the columns, which were initially round, consist of epoxy resin, while for the rectangular stelae, she soon began to apply fragments of mirrors, photographic reproductions, and other everyday materials like gift wrap.

Genzken's fascination with New York permeates many of her works and derives, in large part, from her admiration for the city's urban architectural structures: the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and the former World Trade Center. For her stelae, she clad wooden structures in perforated sheet metal. She pasted on overlapping layers of mirrored and holographic postcards, as well as photographic reproductions. The surface works like skin: its pores communicate with the surrounding space and are therefore open to the outside world.

Genzken named several of the stelae after people she is close to, such as *Dan*, 1999 (after Genzken's friend, the artist Dan Graham) and *Anna*, 1998, thus opening the way to anthropomorphic and personal readings.

"That way I always know exactly which is which. Over the years I've created many objects that, though diverse, look very similar. Because they carry the names of certain people I thought about during my work – Mies or Schindler, names of architects, or Schönberg – I can identify them precisely and know by heart how they look in detail. [...] It is always closely related to my feelings at the time. [...] I named the pillars after friends, but even then, I know exactly which pillar is Wolfgang." [10] (The title refers to Genzken's friend, the artist Wolfgang Tillmans.)

Although they can be viewed one at a time, the columns and stelae are installed in groups and viewers may walk around or between them. The experience resembles a walk through a city, with human stories lying hidden behind building façades. In 2015, Genzken returned to group works, creating *Untitled*, 2015, an installation that consists of three stelae and four towers, which look like cardboard boxes stacked on top of one another, their cores exposed.

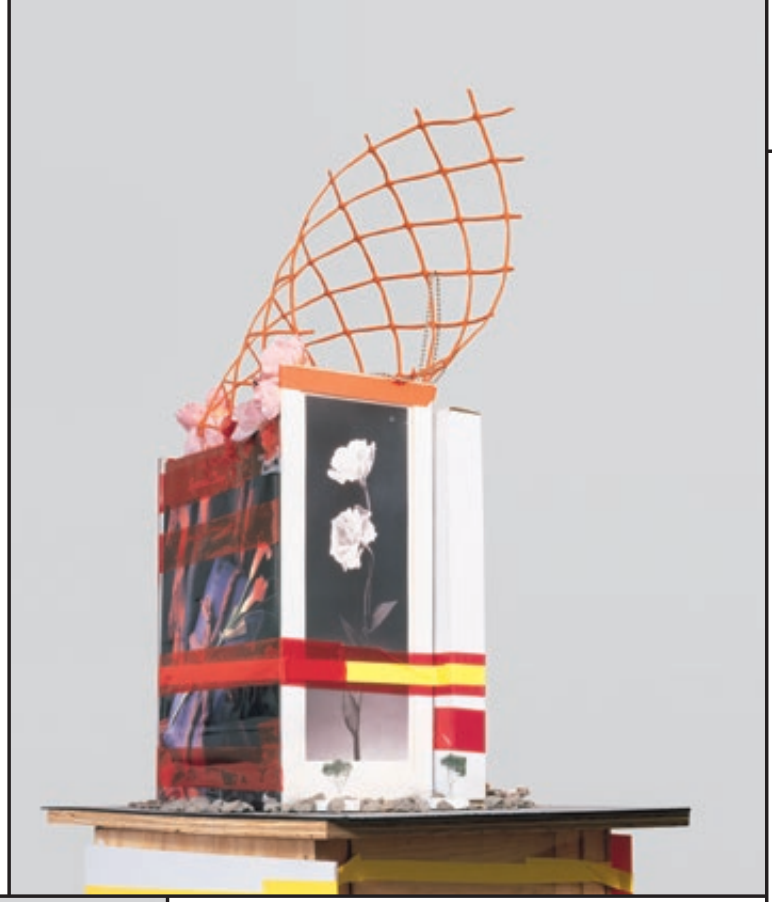
"New York City is a city of incredible stability and solidity. And then the height of the buildings – that impressed me like the people who always seemed a bit happier than the Germans in the street." [11]

In 2009, she returned to the form of the stela, exploring the phenomenon of the wind in the series *Wind*. She was particularly intrigued by the difficulty of representing the wind. In the more than three-meter-high work *Wind (B)*, 2009, which is exhibited here, she shows a large photograph of Michael Jackson, whose white shirt, open save for a few buttons at the bottom, is flapping behind him.

[10] "Diedrich Diederichsen in conversation with Isa Genzken", *Isa Genzken*, London: Phaidon Press 2006, p. 118-121.

[11] Isa Genzken/Wolfgang Tillmans, "Isa Genzken: ein Gespräch mit Wolfgang Tillmans", *Camera Austria*, 81, 2003, p. 129.

Top: *Untitled*, 2015; below: *Wind (B)*, 2009



Fuck the Bauhaus

In the fall of 2000, Isa Genzken presented a small exhibition bearing the title *Fuck the Bauhaus* at the AC Project Room, a non-profit space for contemporary art in New York City. The six homonymous sculptures she showed had the subtitle *New Buildings for New York*, which gave the impression that these were architectural proposals.

The series features works that consist of handmade assemblages, a first for the artist. As three-dimensional collages, they incorporate plastics and everyday objects like pizza boxes, newspaper clippings, and photographs. Held together with tape, they look precarious. Compared with the austere and unembellished materials of stone, glass, and steel used in Bauhaus architecture, the found objects used in the collages appear chaotic in their arrangement.

Fuck the Bauhaus#2 includes a red-and-white pizza box of the kind that is omnipresent in New York. It also uses a flower shop's shipping box bearing the words "Special Day New York". Rising up from the roof of the structure is orange plastic netting that is reminiscent of a construction fence.

Top: *Fuck the Bauhaus#2*, 2000; below: *Fuck the Bauhaus#1*, 2000

Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death

The 2003 series *Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death* is thought to signal a paradigm shift in the work of Isa Genzken. For the first time, she combined iconography and cinematographic time in her sculptures. The pedestals on which the narratives are presented become stages for the colliding fragments of absurd and violent stories.

Genzken derived the title *Empire* from the Empire State Building and *Vampire* from the impression the Chrysler Building made on her. For Genzken, post-9/11 Manhattan saw the proliferation of a vocabulary characterized by the towering modernity of skyscrapers as well as by the post-9/11 apocalypse. "'Empire' makes you think of the US, it feels like looking at some scene of catastrophe." [12] "The topic of war was uppermost in my mind, because the conflict just started up in Iraq [...]" [13]

Toy figures are used here as tiny replicas of the real: they create a backdrop of drama in the everyday, and their miniature size and perspective recall child's play with dollhouses or toy armies. The protagonists are action figures, crawling or climbing in an attempt to scale oversized vases and drinking glasses. The wine glass is a symbol of ritual, celebration, and intoxication, an allusion to the drunkenness and delirium that is present in all the scenarios: we find ourselves churned in a dizzying whirlpool of action and collapse.

"[T]he idea of narration has been a latent aspect of my work. I can make relatively small sculptures that go on to attain a large, relative monumentality. That's a rare attribute. It never has a 1: 1 effect, but rather the quality of a model. The true size is only realized in the viewer's imagination." [14]

[12] Isa Genzken in: Michael Krajewski/Isa Genzken, "Fragility can be a very beautiful thing", in: *parkett*, 69, 2003, p. 96.

[13] "Diedrich Diederichsen in conversation with Isa Genzken", *Isa Genzken*, London: Phaidon Press 2006, p. 11.

[14] ibid., p. 29.

Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death I, 2003

New Buildings for Berlin

Isa Genzken showed *New Buildings for Berlin* for the first time in 2002 at documenta 11. Tall sheets of glass in different colors and featuring different grid patterns are arranged to form vertical assemblages. The autonomous structures are characterized by an easy lightness and fragility, recalling a house of cards. They elude association with any specific location and, as all-over surfaces, they unfold an almost painterly quality. Are they an exterior or an interior?

In conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans, Genzken criticized the poor quality of new buildings in Berlin, especially with regard to their materials. Her sculptures are a tribute to both the slanted and curved lines of Constructivism and to the glassy modernism and Bauhaus tradition of high-rises – in particular to Mies van der Rohe's unrealized skyscraper project Friedrichstraße Berlin of 1921. The elegance and model character of Genzken's radical glass structures are an expression of her predilection for American skyscrapers. Her *New Buildings* are not intended as a recreation of an existing city or of real buildings, but instead propose a new direction toward a novel construction style that is modern and open.

New Buildings for Berlin, 2005

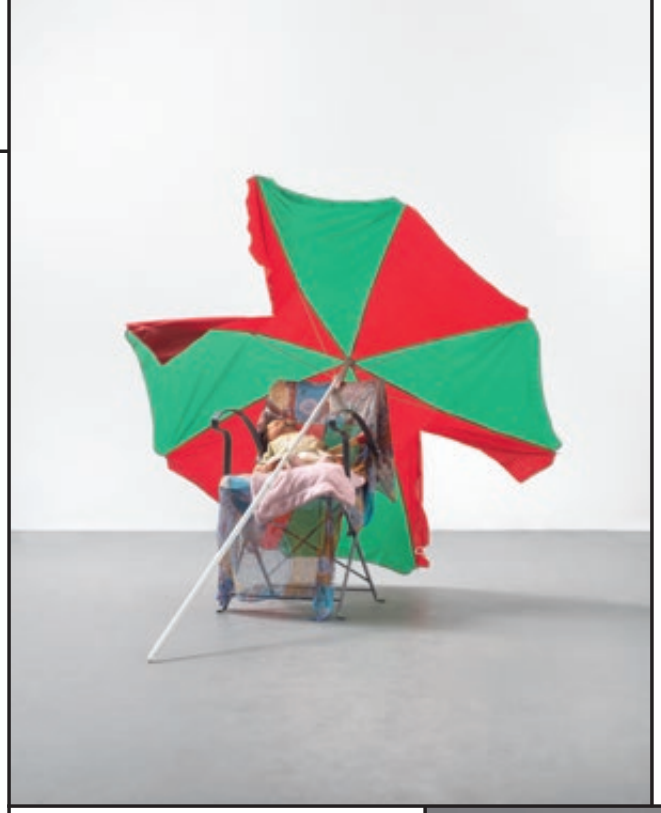
Untitled

At first glance, the ensemble looks colorful, boisterous, and recalls a vacation, but soon it proves to be the scene of some kind of threat, something eerie. Isa Genzken premiered her series *Untitled*, with its parasols, camping chairs, and plastic dolls, at the Wiener Secession in 2006, and followed this with a second instalment at the Skulptur Projekte Münster 07, where it could be viewed in a public space that directly adjoined the Church of Our Lady. Dolls for toddlers sat forlornly under tattered parasols, which, instead of offering protection, evoked a contrary feeling of emotional neglect.

Untitled, 2018 is the most recent work in the exhibition and features a floor collage consisting of German magazines, newspapers, shopping bags, and photographs. Between 1989 and 1991, Isa Genzken collected images from the high-circulation magazine *Der Spiegel*. The years documented in the project bear witness to a significant period in German history: this was the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, and the prelude to the first Gulf War. Yet these images lack photo credits or legends. They have been separated from the articles, from their usual journalistic and informative context.

In this work, Genzken retains the context only from the front cover of the magazines, using only their eye-catching headings: “An Expensive Dream”, “1000 Euros Per Month For Everyone!”, “Being Confident”, “Zero Hour”, “This Is Why We Need Sexism”.

Mass media, social criticism, social ideologies, oversaturation and ubiquitous topics form a body that piles up before viewers, directly addressing us with headlines like “Just Have A Laugh” above a big sad smiley.



Top: *Untitled*, 2006; below: *Untitled*, 2018

Actors

Since the beginning of Iza Genzken's artistic practice, human bodies have played an important role in her work. Most often, they are represented in abstract ways, be it through analogies to architecture or through a given proportion vis-à-vis the viewers' bodies. Since 2007, if not before, the artist has increasingly used commercial mannequins, whose anthropomorphism – the transfer of human characteristics to non-human entities – is literal. The industrially produced dummies with their standardized proportions, limited repertoire of poses, impassive faces, and uniform surfaces stand in contrast to values long associated with classical statues. We often find aspects of receiving in Genzken's works (*Weltempfänger* – World Receiver, *Mein Gehirn* – My Brain, *Fenster* – Window), but these inanimate actors exhibit the opposite qualities. Wearing oversized helmets and other headgear, they are not set up to receive but to fend off, to protect themselves from the outside world. They invite the perception of ambivalence and alienation, premonition and uneasiness. The art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has described them as a "counter-public."

Many of the clothes and accessories worn by the mannequins come from Genzken's own wardrobe. They are like pieces of herself that she has scattered around. "I give the mannequins something of myself. I often part with a personal piece of clothing. This is never easy for me; however, the pain of parting with something beloved is quickly offset by the joy of seeing that it looks becoming on a mannequin."

Top: *Schauspieler*, 2013; below: *Schauspieler II, 6*, 2014

Young Weightlifter, Filming Children, et al.

The exhibition includes several works in which armchairs, chairs, and the act of sitting are very obviously central. There are the two swiveling *Regiesessel* (Director's Chairs, 2003), which Genzken converted into objects that, rather than serving as an invitation to sit, seem to repel any human presence. Slowly, they turn on their own axis.

In the suspended work *Mies* of 2008, Genzken robs the famous Barcelona Chair by Mies van der Rohe of its stable position on the floor, hanging it upside-down from the ceiling; a picture of fragility, its leather cushion is askew.

Untitled, 2006 presents an overturned wheelchair with its seat removed and a reflective foil blanket attached to its backrest. The foil's golden luster contrasts with the sadness, immobility, aging, and general impairment commonly associated with wheelchairs.

In *Der junge Gewichtheber* (Young Weightlifter, 2004), *Kinder filmen XIII* (Filming Children XIII, 2005) and *Kinder filmen XIV* (Filming Children XIV, 2005), Genzken puts plastic chairs on top of collaged and foil-covered stelae. Some of them are also wrapped with reflective cellophane and tape, and with some she places a red bar stool horizontally on top of the stelae so that it seems to almost crush the infant lying underneath it. All chairs have been alienated from their real purpose and assume a throne-like air instead, because of their elevated position. They convey the physicality of persons in negative form – persons who, invested with artificial flowers, dried tree roots, snail shells, or synthetic netting, sit enthroned high above the viewer.

Even in one of her early works, *Data* of 1984, we see two miniature wooden armchairs, clearly intended to intensify the monumentality of the structure above the chairs and make the work as a whole look like a model for a large outdoor sculpture.

Top left: *Der junge Gewichtheber*, 2004; bottom left: *Untitled*, 2006; bottom right: *Kinder filmen XIV*, 2005