

Olga Balema “The Distance” at Kunstverein in Hamburg  
by Leonardo Orion Dal Colle

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At the mouth of the Elbe, Hamburg's landscape is dominated by colliding symphonies of economic exchange. The Kunstverein's brick building, once a flower market, now borders the edge of a district where skyscrapers are severed by highway-size roads, against a network of capillary-like railways jetting threads through the city. Walking through the foyer, I scan my surroundings, note a staircase, and head to the first floor. A mellow ridged form—a memento of Olga Balema's production from the past decade—serves as an incipit to the exhibition.

Seemingly trapped in a state of mutation, somewhere between a sfumato lower body part and a damp piece of flesh, *Threat to Civilization 2* (2015) is made of an outer layer of PVC, double-layered, a water stuffing, and a metal rod ancillary defining its stretched corporeality. A mirage of self-containment emerges symbiotically, as if the sculpture is leaning into its own periphery, shielding a nostalgic metaphorical instinct for self-feeding. Liquid spills, spreading bacteria, and the appearance of forms suffusing the boundaries between containment and unresolved threats speak to the infrastructures of societal progress and buoyant streams of evolution. Commodity-driven consumption fosters habit formation, establishing a burdensome relationship between single moving entities and their collective assignment, further “activated” through the frantic pulse of market dynamics. *Threat to Civilization 2* discloses a bitter allergy to mundanity, where the subjective is boiled down to its bones only to vanish in the room next door.

With her formative years characterized by incessant moves between her native Ukraine, Germany, and United States, Balema became increasingly aware of how to recognize the way her past was strewn with and shaped by the spectral, lingering detritus of the USSR and steeped in the prepackaged aesthetics of Americana. She currently resides in New York, and her practice orbits the volatile terrain of cultural identity, where perpetual dissolution and reconstitution serve as means for dissecting the theatricality of capitalist societies, contrasting the ideological afterimages of a post-Soviet condition. Yet neither of these historical scaffolds has managed to contain her identity, or ossify her artistic lexicon. Instead, her work exists in a state of fluid subversion, resisting formula in favor of perpetual mutation.

A forced condition of transit fosters a dispossessing quality in Balema's work, where the notion of migration slips into the background, turning into a loose shadow intermittently flickering at the edges of directionality. An instinct-driven exploration of material provides an outlet for art history and contemporary practice to reexamine what mind- body dualism can achieve when subjugated to an overflow of "stuff." Balema appears to harbor a conflictual relationship to material belonging—a sentiment that emerged in a 2016 conversation with artist Lucie Stahl highlighting how her engagement with materiality extends beyond its aesthetic polarities. <sup>1</sup> It finds fertile ground in an emotionally and politically charged discourse, tethered by the tensions between production and extinction.

The material plateau of the series *Loop* (2025), the spine and core of the exhibition, manifests through a generous time frame, hiding a split of tempos applied differently to the two sides of the space. (The artist clued me in that the right side took longer to envision and construct than the left one.) What seems an organic approach to angles, lights, and space plays a role in the transmuting stage and anticipates a channel of contrasts between exterior and interior emotional dimensions. Once opened to the public, the exhibition began to punctuate a network of investigative currents extending beyond loud media cycles, broadcasting conflicts, and legislative limbos. It's silence that spills over the visitor's trajectory through the space. I find myself contemplating how the artist's practice and its ongoing evolution, which dismantles conventional perceptions of texts and visual frameworks as contemporary icons, might resonate with the desolation embedded in the shifting landscapes of contemporary migration.

I wonder how Balema, upon coming into the room, began rethinking, reestablishing barriers, and opening gaps in the ambiance of the galleries by situating the works and meditating on their state. My mind fills with an image of her moving along continuously re-formed axes, letting the work begin from the rawest place. My email exchange with curator Milan Ther carries an almost posthumous tone, evoking the impossibility of fully reconstructing, even through documentation and images, the fractured theatricality revitalizing one's experiences when alone among the works. As if pouches of water were freezing and extruded organically from the ground up, the fourteen sculptures titled *Loop* 232 to 245 suggest an absence of figurative archetypes.

Attempts to gather a collective view of the room fail as the brain momentarily forgets how to compensate for its blind spot, unable to fill in the missing information from surrounding visual inputs. Beyond the pictorial cutouts formed by the material's transparency, the sight of surfaces washed in a bleached tone further unsettles perception. The sinuosity of each sheet, fused together and either layered in acrylic or left naked, seems to have expelled an apprehension of form that was visible in previous works, but now transcends a finiteness of language that reclaims memory as central to self- representation. Outstripping the correlation between texture and purpose, the viewer's perception of its position along the room's median axis yields to a hypnotic rigor. The inapt attention underscores a suppressed concern: How fragile does consciousness become once it merges with the outer world? In search of an answer, contemplating the "know-how" described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty illustrates a definition of context where its merging with human consciousness, even with only minor changes, still requires an infinite set of propositional beliefs to describe its fragile state. <sup>2</sup> . A peekaboo of angular, sharp corners ignites an expansion of plastic into the show's elementary constituency, where variable dimensions insulate the sculptures in an expansive vulnerability to their outer condition.

As contexts for newer materials are established, the dependency of background information is concurrently reinforced by the generic transposition of memories. Balema embeds historical and political narratives within materials of "modern" significance to subliminally accentuate their

proposed by Alexander Galloway, we may grasp how “information exists whenever worldly things are ‘in-formed’ or ‘put into form.’” 3

Fictitious clues leak into the internally fractured air chambers of the sculptures. Jogging bodies outside the Kunstverein absorb the same Benzotriazole-based UV solvents used to treat polycarbonate. 4 Our relationship with these works becomes congenital. The boundaries between human and human-made bodies are exposed to a synthetic swelling, lacking beginning, middle, or end but just composing: *Loop*. The ambient light shining through the shallow convoluted apertures reveals a dual progeny—a preliminary scheme designed to conceal stylistically significant interventions, shifting parameters of self-assuring canons. A strip of yellow tape hides behind a frosted surface—I will not say where.

Hour by hour, each sculpture surpasses metrics of volume, expanding into a battlefield of light that renders the polycarbonate visually pliable. An anti-monumental flurry of horizontal scapes and vertically sunken geometries reaches just under an average adult height. The perimeter of the sculptures’ staged occupancy in the institutional setting betrays the classical employment of a plinth’s function as a supportive platform for exposure and visual worship. Instead, the codes of an aseptic display imperatively guide the gaze on a rollercoaster of physical interruptions, disrupting hierarchies and challenging the typical formal readings of sculpture in Western museological contexts.

Theatrically dissecting the space at different heights, the plinths offer themselves as obstacles to the viewer’s spontaneous engagement. By coding further barriers between viewer and work, the plinths resist prescriptive forms of exhibitionism. At boot height, a plinth’s horizontal extrusion plays with a single sheet of plastic, suspending it from an imminent fall. Moving diagonally in the opposite direction, a reclining set of reconfigured parallelepipeds are a barrier, partially obscuring another work that hides behind the plinth thanks to Balema’s decision to cover its plain transparent surface with Rowlux Illusion Film.

Proposing the floor as an open field, where instructions, objectives, or guidelines are not contemplated, is yet another mechanism that reinforces the volatile nature of the work. The pavement, with its markings, rubbery incisions, and chiseled steps, attests to past endeavors, creating a potential for the works to camouflage within its wrinkles, vanishing at dawn and organically reviving at sunrise. The en-plein-air chronology of excavations mapped across the floor invites the sculptures to blend and drift into a virtually avoidant relationship with the viewer’s gaze.

A calisthenic exercise of undiscovered symbolologies challenges our received notion of what it means for a physical entity to expand an object’s aura while perpetually instrumentalizing the analysis of its origin. That which fuels contemporary societies globally lies beneath the crust of the Earth. Rigging and scooping relentlessly, pipes and boreholes are maintained, docile, through electronic submersible pumps and a triad of recoveries 5 The ground is gutted from that dense opacity, unable to resist invasive, hollowing forces. The very transparency of the sheets of polycarbonate subsidizing *Loop*’s materiality unleash a meditation on its distant relation to its biological source. As almost “pure” material without tangible economic fruition, the works sit in a constant rewriting of their future tense, where limited resources constrain their very apparatus and projected oil shortages generate blank images that testimony of socially and historically charged sceneries.

Set parameters for encounters with exoticized, dissonant by-products of profit-driven systems do not apply to Balema’s latest works. Resisting the market-driven trends of viability and durability, the works displayed stand against longevity protocols, withdrawing from attention-seeking chores.

Walking back down the stairs, my third eye is a rusted, roving coin, dancing, flipping shadows over  
amber light.

at Kunstverein Hamburg  
until April 27, 2025

Olga Balema (b. 1984, Lviv, Ukraine) lives and works in New York. She studied at the University of Iowa and the University of California, Los Angeles, later participating in residencies at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. Solo presentations of her work have been held at Camden Art Centre, London; Kunstverein Nürnberg, Germany; and the Swiss Institute, New York, among others. The artist has participated in group exhibitions at Mumok, Vienna; Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland; and the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, and beyond. Her work was also featured in the New Museum Triennial, New York (2015); the Baltic Triennial, Lithuania (2018); and the Whitney Biennial, New York (2019). Balema's works are represented in numerous museum collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria; and Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

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