

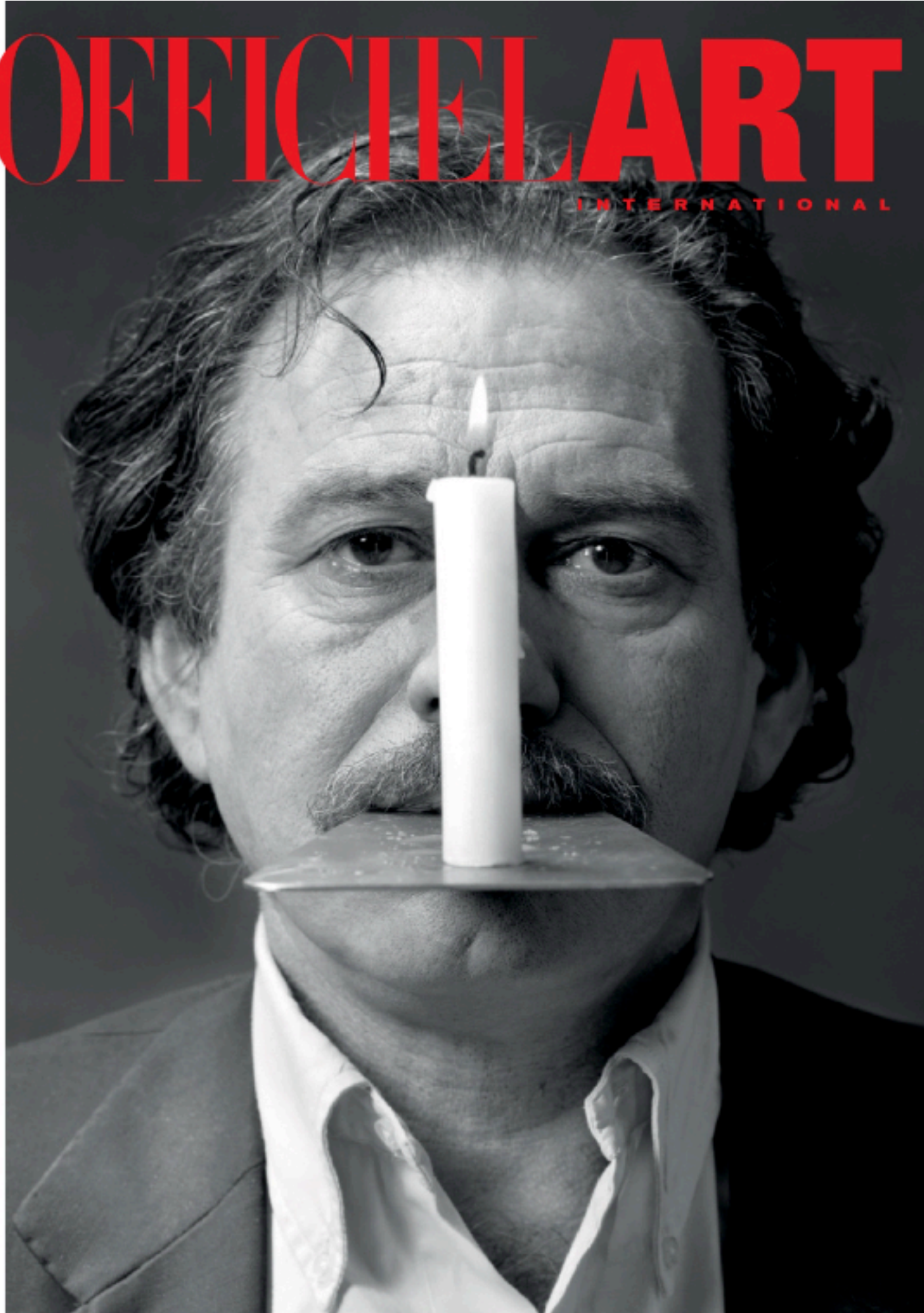
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Isa Genzken World Receiver

by Ben Eastham

Winner of the 2019 edition of the Nasher Prize, the most ambitious international award in contemporary sculpture, German artist Isa Genzken (b. 1948, Bad Oldesloe) has constantly reinvented the language of sculpture by creating objects and anarchic assemblages inspired by history and popular culture. In this in-depth essay, Ben Eastham retraces the steps of an exceptional career spanning four decades, from “the languid minimalist forms” begun in the late 1970s to the “chaotic, deconstructed bricolage of her twenty-first century productions.”

**ISA GENZKEN IS THE
WINNER OF THE
2019 NASHER PRIZE.**

Isa Genzken, *Schauspieler II*, 8, 2014; black child mannequin on glass stand, life-jacket, silver mirror foil, passport, woolen jumper, American football helmet, spray paint; 154 x 45 x 40 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.





Above: Isa Genzken, *Hallelujah* (New Museum), 2012; wooden crates, acrylic on canvas, plastic, glass, dried branches, artificial flowers, casters; 352 x 142 x 102 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Zwirner, London/New York/Hong Kong.

Right page: Isa Genzken, *Empire/Vampire III*, 16", 2004; mixed media, metal, glass, plastic, lacquer, wood; 167 x 60 x 46 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.



In the summer of 1973 Isa Genzken lay stomach-down on the floor of Konrad Fischer's Düsseldorf gallery, resting her chin in her hands to give herself "the widest possible view" of the space around her. The twenty-four-year-old German artist had resolved to carry out Bruce Nauman's *Instructions for a Mental Exercise* – simple techniques in stillness and silence – and to record her experiences in writing. Lying there, she found it increasingly difficult to disentangle her body from the world: "I perceived myself," she writes, "to be part of what I was looking at." She performed the meditations repeatedly over the course of seven days, making minor adjustments and feeling the space recalibrate around her body. On one occasion, having fallen asleep during a previous attempt, she thought it wise to drink a glass of champagne before lying down. To her surprise, and perhaps someone could have warned her, this "very badly affected my ability to concentrate" and "made me aggressive."

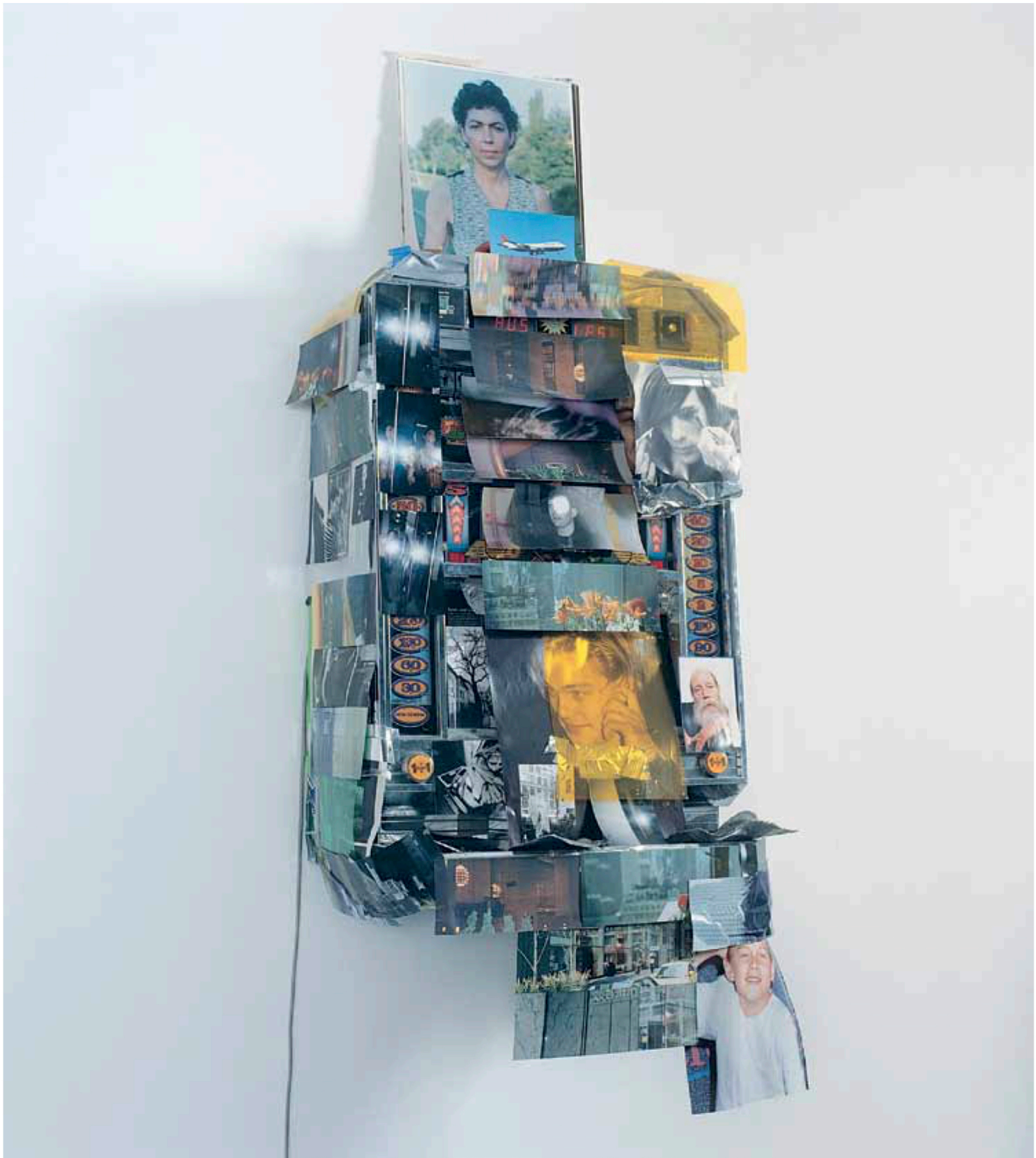
This conflict between pure intellectual strategy and the artist's own irascible, restless energy would come to charac-

terize an oeuvre of almost unmatched range and ambition in postwar European art. The prototypical minimalist gesture – a body lying motionless on the floor of an empty, white-walled gallery – is compromised, I would say enlivened, by the irrepressible impulses of that same body. Genzken's account of the experience establishes a productive tension between ideas of art as an autonomous sphere of human activity – defined by its own set of rules, untainted by the "real world" – and the kind of "social" art that acknowledges and incorporates the experience of the artist and the state of the world around her.

Indeed, Genzken's long career describes its own historical sweep, moving from the languid minimalist forms begun in the late 1970s through the brutalist architectural ruins of the 1980s and into the chaotic, deconstructed *bricolage* of her twenty-first century productions, always resisting categorization or easy summary in language. If her oeuvre is characterized by a series of dramatic shifts and about-turns, its overall narrative is entropic, the solid and coherent forms of her early years disintegrating

into fragments and, ultimately, near-formless chaos. In doing so, it might be seen to trace the history of western Europe from the modernist optimism of German reconstruction, through the disillusion of the late twentieth century towards a contemporary moment in which the postwar social consensus – liberal, democratic, technological, scientific and progressive – is under threat.

But let's begin at the beginning. The sensations that Genzken describes during her exercises play out in the "Ellipsoids" (1976-82) and "Hyperbolas" (1979-83) that made her name as a sculptor. Lying on the floor, these streamlined, aerodynamic and self-contained minimalist sculptures seem at once to occupy the gallery space in which they are presented, like a conventional three-dimensional volume, and to divide it like a two-dimensional line. Designed with the aid of computer programs and carved by the artist's own hand, the works express a number of different contradictions: they promise the kind of all-encompassing sublime delivered by the vast canvases of postwar American abstraction (Genzken was an admirer of Barnett Newman, the arch-



Above: Isa Genzken, *Spielautomat*, 1999-2000; slot machine, paper, chromogenic color prints, tape, plastic foil; 160 x 65 x 50 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York. Right page: Isa Genzken, *Hallelujah (Yellow)*, 2012; MDF, metal, plastic, glass, mirror foil, perspex, globe, plastic figure, casters; 256 x 101 x 55 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.



transcendentalist), even as they seem to adopt minimalism's narrow focus on the object stripped of any spiritual power or narrative content. They also look like oversized versions of the kind of things you might encounter in your daily life: toothpicks, perhaps, or elongated ballpoint pens. While the comparison of Donald Judd's stainless steel boxes to, let's say, an unusually elegant paperweight would prompt rolled eyeballs, condescending sighs and the accusation that you weren't paying sufficiently close attention to the "thing-in-itself," Genzken has always been comfortable with the idea that her sculptures could refer to objects and ideas existing beyond the sacred space of the gallery. So these early sculptures set the tone of a career that makes claims for art that seem irreconcilable, combining the faith in art's freedom from a degraded mass culture even as it invited comparison with the everyday beauty of its products. A high modernist project that doesn't deny the colonization of our lives by the objects and images of low culture.

That Genzken is a determined contrarian was made clear by her decision to pursue sculpture, a province – in Germany particularly – dominated by men determined to protect it from the nefarious influence of women (as evidenced by some of the misogynist criticism directed at her early work). That she could have successfully pursued a different path – at the same school where Gerhard Richter was her teacher, Candida Höfer, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky were studying photography under Bernd and Hilla Becher – is illustrated by the "Hi Fi" series of framed prints she produced in 1979. Finding in the form and function of high-end stereo equipment interesting analogues to art objects, she re-photographed print advertisements in English, American, French and Japanese magazines and displayed them as independent works of art. Anticipating the appropriative strategies of the Pictures Generation emerging in New York around the same time, the strategy broke down the dividing line between form and content, art and the world, high culture and commerce.

But this line of enquiry was, like others, abandoned before the artist got bored with it. Indeed, it would prove typical of Genzken's practice that just as she was gaining recognition for her "Ellipsoids" and "Hyperbolas" – in 1982 she had been included in Documenta 7, the rubber stamp of high contemporary art – she abandoned these elegant wooden forms to begin a series of aggressively uncouth sculptures in plaster and cement. Exhibited on skeletal steel plinths, works such as *Kirke* (Church, 1986) seemed to represent a drastic shift

away from the techno-utopian and universalist promise of modernism towards a disillusioned vision of the world realized in crumbling architectural fragments.

It's easy to read this as a critique of the built environment of German cities, in which bare functionalism and cheap brutalism predominated, and the idea of society it embodies. But Genzken's work is rarely so unambiguous, and with the benefit of hindsight we might ask whether social breakdown is necessarily to be mourned: made in the final years before the collapse of Communism, these hunks of concrete resemble nothing more than the blocks of memorabilia into which the Berlin Wall would be chopped. And perhaps they are not so lifeless as they seem: in the *Weltempfänger* (World Receivers, 1987-92), similarly sized corrugated blocks have sprouted antennae. Resembling radio transmitters, the series can be read as a joke at minimalism's humorless exaltation of simple cubes of material. But the apparent desperation of these things to interact with the world – to transmit and to receive information – is a further example of how Genzken plays on the line separating art from the world.

Indeed, however you read her engagement with the architectural discourse, she was not above making her own practical proposals. The enigmatically titled "New Buildings for Berlin" (2001-04) is a series of miniature skyscrapers composed of colored rectangular panes of standing glass, like architectural models for a stained-glass cityscape bathed in flickering tints of light. The collapse threatened by these sculptures – held together by sticky tape and silicon – comes to pass in Genzken's chaotic later work.

Made (like the tottering "New Buildings") around the time Genzken witnessed firsthand the September 11 terror attacks on New York, and in the atmosphere of crisis that followed, *Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death* (2002-03) is a suite of makeshift dioramas depicting some kind of unnamable crisis. In these comic-grotesque scenes – comprising plastic toy tanks, action figurines, cheap wine goblets and artificial plants alongside more expensive, but no less well-treated, materials – the end of the world arrives, but with none of the grandeur of biblical revelation or the expensive bombast of Hollywood. The first impression on encountering these sculptures is of total degradation and collapse: they are shocking.

And yet, and yet... this jumble of cheap materials and mass production carries its own peculiar kind of cheap-sex, junk-shop beauty, and critics may have been too quick to read nihilism and catastrophe into the

work. Perhaps it depends on your politics: either you see an arrangement of "humble" objects mass-manufactured in different parts of the world dignified by their recuperation into "high art," or you see a bunch of tacky crap in random aggregations signaling the final collapse of the material and formal hierarchies on which any meaningful definition of "high art" depends. But I'm not sure Genzken would recognize that binary choice, and we can accept that they depict "crisis" while bearing in mind that the word in Greek carries no negative or positive connotations. It simply denotes a dramatic change, the consequences of which cannot immediately be evaluated.

For better or worse, the impression of the old order collapsing was reinforced by the pointedly untitled sculptures exhibited at the Vienna Secession in 2006. Abandoned wheelchairs draped in shapeless mirror foil, fabric, ribbons and tape effected the total collapse of sculptural form; their accompaniment by empty crutches leaning up against the museum walls reinforced the impression that art was not only absent but damaged and diminished (as well as nodding, perhaps, to the "adaptives" of the equally puckish Viennese artist Franz West). The work of a younger generation of artists such as Jesse Darling, whose sculptures consider the vulnerable body and the failure of wider support networks, suggests the influence of works such as these and *Hospital (Ground Zero)* (2008), its tottering torso bound together by tape, supported by a drinks tray which is wheeled around on casters. Even in suffering, though, there is a kind of destructive beauty: the head composed of artificial flowers, the tray lined by shot glasses.

There is far too much going on in Genzken's work to even inadequately be summarized here, but that's really the point. Her practice has always resisted categorization by veering between – and attempting to incorporate and assimilate – a multitude of opposing strategies, value systems and approaches. Sometimes the forms she adopts are sufficiently strong to contain and reconcile those contradictions; at other times they crack under the internal pressures. In every case, the form reflects changes in the history of contemporary art, in her own circumstances and in the state of western society: no surprise then, bearing the last in mind, that they recently seem to be breaking apart.

Ben Eastham is a London-based writer and editor. He is co-founder of *The White Review* and associate editor of *ArtReview*.



Isa Genzken, *Rose*, 1993-97; steel, aluminium, lacquer; height 800 cm approx. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.