

Andrea Blum

Parallel Lives

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The work of New York artist **Andrea Blum** (b. 1950) falls between sculpture, architecture and design, exploring the relationship of the sociopolitical world to the private psychological one.

Since the 1980's she has built permanent and temporary projects in Europe and the United States, and has exhibited in museums, galleries and numerous exhibition venues. Blum has had one-person exhibitions at La Conservera Centro de Arte Contemporaneo, SP; Stroom Center for Art & Architecture, NL; Henry Moore Institute, UK; and Le Crestet Centre D'art Contemporain, FR, and has made special projects for the 51st Venice Biennale; Maison Rouge, Paris; MUDAM, Luxembourg; l'Observatoire, Marseille, and the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Paris where she was the set designer for the Opera, *La Favorite* by Donizetti

Her interest in furniture is often a jumping-off point that enables her to translate themes into objects and objects into metaphoric configurations. The furniture resembles the ubiquitous couch of the consulting room; the Peacock is going through his last stage of mating season; the video panorama is filmed in the Saguaro Desert and requires slowing down to notice the barely noticeable.

Blum is the recipient of Fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Graham Foundation, Art Matters Inc., the New York Foundation for the Arts, the SJWeiler Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, and was named Chevalier, Order of Arts and Letters, by the French Minister of Culture. She is a Full Professor of Combined Media and Associate Chair of Studio, in the Department of Art & Art History at Hunter College in New York, and frequently lectures on the relationship of Art and Architecture and the social interface between the two.

For her exhibition at Kunsthau Baselland, Blum will transform the annex of Kunsthau into a space that examines our connection to the natural world, mediated by the exhibition design's use of furniture and media. *Parallel Lives* at Kunsthau Baselland is her first exhibition in Switzerland.

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Andrea Blum in Conversation with Ines Goldbach

Ines Goldbach: We began this conversation in spring 2020, when we talked about your project here at the Kunsthhaus Baselland and about your artistic language in general. It couldn't be a better time to dive into your artistic approach in more depth. Within your work, you often realize artworks — both inside and outside — that are situated somewhere between architecture, sculpture, and design. Some of them — or some parts of them — can be used, such as by sitting, standing, or lying on them, while others can't. Inner and outer space is by definition the place where our existence, social relations, and perspectives are shaped.

Andrea Blum: From the time when I was a student, I felt that art should be more accessible. As a sculptor, with an interest in architecture and design, I saw that by merging the three I could find a way of working that would dissolve the line between art and daily life. When I began making art for public space, I wanted to approach monumentality in an un-monumental way, and found that the only way I could work at such a large scale was to insert functional amenities, like benches and fountains, to distract from the more socio-psychological interventions I wanted to impose. Whether indoors or outdoors, I have always designed my work to respond to the specific site.

IG: If we consider your layout, your subtly deceptive, and your works within the exhibition space here in Basel, where visitors can either move around or sit and look at the whole configuration, I wonder whether you see the space as an active place where different views can be mobilized?

AB: The annex at the Kunsthhaus is long and narrow, with large windows on one side and an interior wall that divides the space in two. Viewed from the outside, the reflective surface

of the windows blends the exterior and interior reflections, flattening the spatial divide and confusing spatial proximities. In response to the design of the building, the four furniture-like objects that constitute the core of the exhibition are installed to resemble a furniture showroom. Like a showroom, the works are to be looked at, sat on, and wandered through. One object resembles a psychoanalytic couch, another the Tower of Babel, the third is a sculpture that doubles as a desk, and the fourth is a lounge I will use to display publications by the Kunsthhaus. Each is paired with something from the natural world, shifting the focus away from the art object to the particular species. Together they form a tableau that is accessible to exhibition visitor and visible to passerby on the street.

IG: Let's focus on your initial idea and concept of integrating living plants and animals into your installations, which have formed part of many of your installations for years. The current situation and stricter regulations made it impossible to have live animals in the exhibition, and so you had to use plants and substitutes for the animals instead. As you often work with nature, I think it's important to understand that it is not about "exhibiting" living plants and animals but to make us aware of a sometimes absurd attitude or behavior — or perhaps even desire — to bring nature into our homes, without realizing that this means the animals being in cages, far away from their natural habitats. And I think it's illuminating to see that because of an extreme version of caging animals, we are now the ones being caged. Could you say something about the birds (canaries), the lizard, and the cactus being living "elements" of the installation and idealized "images" of nature at the same time?

AB: Twenty years ago, I began incorporating other life forms in my work to act as a human substitute, a social divider, and simply as an optimistic presence. The babble of birds, the frozen movement of a lizard, and the symbiotic relationship between aquatic species were used as metaphorical device to mirror our own social behavior. Designed to be observed from a distance, in a cage or vitrine, a protective barrier was established between species to species, and "us" to "them". With the addition of plants, one was able to daydream about being in a different landscape without leaving home. With the current restrictions that prevented the use of live animals, it was necessary to re-examine

the natural components of each project and find adequate substitutions. Overall, the installation is designed to point to the fact that we, and a hugely diverse range of species briefly share *Parallel Lives*, the title of the exhibition.

IG: What understanding of the everyday objects that furnish and shape our daily lives do we have from looking at them now? Is looking at our daily surroundings and personally furnished homes or the architecture we are living in always an expression, not only of taste, but of social conditions, of daily strategies?

AB: It is a privilege to live in a space that corresponds to one's own way of life and aesthetic tastes.

IG: That brings me to another question: Can you tell me more about these kinds of zones and systems that you have been working on for such a long time? Each of your works seems to inhabit the different zones and definitions of art and life, the everyday and the extraordinary — a very interesting perspective, especially at this unique moment in time, when many homes have had to be transformed into temporary offices, and the separation of private and public doesn't seem all that clear.

AB: For most of my life, my home and studio have been in the same location, in a space with no walls. Because of this choice of lifestyle, I divide my space into zones where I can work, sleep, eat, and socialize. The question of how to live in the social conditions one lives in, is an ever-changing design problem, filled with the complexities of the particular context. This question has motivated my work as an artist from the very beginning, whether I am designing a space, a house, an installation, or a piece of furniture.

The merging of art and daily life is different now than it was twenty years ago, when art's intervention in public space was more in response to the social and functional attributes of a site. Now, Art is more attached to economy and ownership. In public space, the form it takes reflects a more ephemeral way of life, like music and fashion. In a way, it has become more populist, which is a good thing.

IG: You were talking about special relations, and the fact that doors and especially windows are thresholds between the inner and outer world. These days, it feels as if digital media is the

new window between the inner and outer world, without the physical experience generated by the presence of an architectural element such as a door or a window as well as the act of opening it. Do you think that we have lost our spatial sensibilities, not only now but in general?

AB: Media has mediated our relationship to real space for a long time. The boombox and walkman eliminated ambient sound, then the iPhone and laptop eliminated place. Recently, meetings can be held on Zoom with a background image of outer space, a tropical island, or one's own living room — we can choose to reveal our private lives or invent fictional ones. The computer is now the threshold that straddles our inner and outer worlds.

IG: Are these situations that you are creating also places of retreat, then?

AB: If art can provide a retreat from one world into another, then it is a success! I think of my work as a tool to recalculate where we are.

IG: Let me ask you a final question. As a political person on the one hand and an active artist, teacher, and professor on the other, how did this political, social, and public health situation affect your work and perhaps your actions?

AB: As an artist, I look at history and the present as the groundwork for imagining a future. As an educator, my mission is to give students the tools to do the same. It is a responsibility I take very seriously, and I believe that the more we know, the more empowered we become.