

Diedrich Diederichsen

Victory Over the Street
Isa Genzken's Untitled (4 Türme, 3 Stelen), 2015

The street. That means three overlapping ontologies. First, the mathematical and physical ontology of the immanent interpretation and treatment of three-dimensional relationships and their parameters: length, width, weight, density, consistency, color, transparency, light, temperature, sound, and many others. Architecture, traffic, weather. Then the cultural and political ontology of the semantics that arise from the use and population of the street by (human and nonhuman) residents, visitors, customers, vendors, workers, poets, photographers, and many others. Finally, the economic and material ontology: its financing and the physical as well as cultural embodiment of the investments contained in the buildings, parking lots, plazas, and roof gardens and, bound up with them, the value of the street as a whole and the costs involved in preserving that value, for construction projects as well as for security services and their logistics. However, the (everyday) interweaving of these three modes of being in turn gives rise to specific hybrids and specific (meta-)semantic zones. Artists, musicians, and filmmakers bear particular responsibility for these in the romantic as well the nonromantic senses - Isa Genzken has accomplished important work in this area. Her preferred streets are located primarily in New York, and her treatment of them combines the romantic with the nonromantic, the hard in every respect (material, physical) with the effusive. But she is also interested in price (as the appearance of value). She likes to talk about how and in what way American architecture - unlike its German counterpart - works with expensive materials and solutions.¹

The ensemble on which this text will focus is referred to internally as "4 Türme, 3 Stelen" [4 Towers, 3 Columns]. It is probably Isa Genzken's last large, fully elaborated work. The artist has left it untitled. But the rhythmic count of its elements can also be divided in proportions other than three to four; it supports other stresses, which can also overlap polyrhythmically. There are also two plus one columns and two plus two towers. For two of the columns are almost completely identical; unlike these two, the third is largely free of pasted plastic film and thus left in the matte ocher of the MDF material from which all of the ensemble's objects are constructed. And two pairs of towers stand side by side, as do three (two plus one) columns. The first impression is thus one of order and a certain system. A column with no plastic film (but with architectural images of similar skyscrapers on the back) is juxtaposed with its film-coated duplication, and these two in turn with twice as many towers. Yet the columns also form a group of three against two groups of two. The beat, or count, is a tricky one. One might think it's four four, or four-on-the-floor, Isa Genzken's beloved techno beat; but then optical syncopations begin to creep in in the manner just described, and it turns into something like drum and bass, another odd-numbered urban musical style of the '90s, which was initially called Jungle. The idea that skyscrapers, with their massive scale that leaves traditional anthropological proportions behind, constantly threaten a potentially catastrophic and teetering or potentially graceful movement is a classic of the twentieth century. The notion that New York skyscrapers are backdrops and protagonists of concrete dance and music cultures, from Michael Snow's *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964) to the album covers of the ZE record label around 1980, is a topos often played on by Isa Genzken. Jungle emerged as a style in addition or opposition to techno at the time when she was becoming increasingly involved with electronic club music in New York and Berlin.

References to the "urban jungle" ("Großstadtdschungel") first appear in everyday German in the early 1970s, according to *Das Digitale Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (The Digital Dictionary of the German Language). Its use begins to skyrocket in 1975, taking off on a track almost perpendicular to its previous trajectory, and reaches a peak in the early '90s. After that, it slowly falls off again. The fate of this expression may reflect a certain preoccupation or perhaps a certain fascination in the German-speaking world. The dialectic of chaos and planning in the cities of the West, whether expressed as a fascination with New York or as a fear of no-go areas, reached the German public through trips to the US and through US films and TV series. The debates about gentrification; the racist fear of migration and diversity and, since the 1990s, of so-called "parallel societies"; debates and TV series about suburbs, ghettos, and clans; and, on the other hand, city planning discourses in the field of cultural studies; movements like "Reclaim the Streets"; and a short-lived boom of

critical urban sociology and architectural theory all contributed to the phenomenon. The central antagonism underlying this complex has interested Isa Genzken (at least) since her first trip to New York (with her aunt, who was a stewardess in the 1960s), and since she began to become interested in architecture and sculpture under the influence of the '68 situation: the tension between a modernist planning euphoria and an excess of capitalist contradictions in urban ways of life. Both poles are constantly proving each other wrong, yet both continually develop a repertoire of gestures suggesting they possess the truth, indeed that the truth of their position is obvious. Be it the beauty of the skyscraper model, the wit of the graffiti that refutes it, or the ugliness of its financing model.

Genzken has always brought both a fascination with and a critical attitude toward modernism to her work with the visible historical result that the latter has failed twice over. Its protagonists achieved its best outcomes by purifying and intensifying forms and forcing them into immanent solutions. In doing so, they overlooked or actively ignored two problems. First of all, the purest, most beautiful building and the mathematically immanent sculpture become investment objects. Second, they are inhabited, populated, used. Both their abstract (planned) and their concrete (materially realized) sides develop a dynamic of their own, essentially along the battle lines of the class struggle. According to its own ideology ("Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zwecke," or "purposiveness without purpose"), art must not become an object of use. Its attempt in this case to be an image or object that embodies a kind of perfect, ideal, abstract use - a perfect purposiveness that cannot be contaminated - had converged with another famous/infamous abstraction that is able to dispense with any intuition or image: money.

Nevertheless, Genzken created objects that were able to solve formal and mathematical problems of bodies and volumes in such a way that they seemed to remain untouched by any social semantics, while also almost seeming not to touch the ground - her famous "Ellipsoids" and "Hyberbolos," for example. But I am not going to construct a contrast between these and other ultra-elegant, self-contained solutions on the one hand and her collage-like ensembles, books, or films on the other, which are filled to the brim with so-called social content. Instead, I wish to emphasize - precisely in the context of the ensemble at issue here - her singular ability to capture the mutual imbrication of these opposites as the point of the artistic act - and not just in an obvious dialectical sense (with the romanticism of the dirty street finding its limit as the compensation or other side of the beautiful abstractness of a city planned against or without its population). In this context, music would be more than just a metaphor for the artistically useful, intellectually challenging, but difficult to plan or conceptualize effects of the clash between abstraction and the vehement feedback of the social.

Architecture - including and especially in its definition of sculptural volumes - always involves utilizing various forms of knowledge which are socially produced but unable to predict how their results will be used (or which, if they do, regularly make themselves ridiculous or provide material for reactionaries like Tom Wolfe, who make fun of the fact that the residents of Le Corbusier unités hang lace curtains in their kitchen windows). For investors, this is a problem.

For the other side, however, the idea would have to be pivotal that constructing a body, defining as well as displacing or abolishing a volume, represents something like a building block - or the first building block - of any political act. A building block in every sense of the word. The notion of use - and of misuse, investment, financialization - can only be conceived and represented if it is possible, at this level of abstract ideality, to produce a concrete particular rather than an idea. The evidence that what is recognized as correct can also be realized represents a fundamental building block of materialist thinking. It also leads to a notion that Genzken encountered as an objection early in her career. Her superformalism had given rise to objects that looked like something, objects that - in their interweaving of different forms of knowledge - generated bodies and volumes that didn't represent anything but were impossible to regard as pure abstraction. As the artist explained to me in an interview, they reminded all her viewers of something concrete - "a spear," for example, or "a boat."¹¹ And of course for the dogma of minimalism that was a problem.

The fact that perfect immanence can be utilized in the outside world - as a boat, to cross a forbidden border on a river, or a spear, to hunt edible animals or hold pursuers at bay: this contamination is Genzken's material of choice. However, she does not celebrate it in its results, as a contamination that has already taken place, but rather as the outcome of a process, a process which fascinates her like a *sports match* or a novel. Both of these involve experiments in which the protagonists must have clear contours, must be self-sufficient and (re)present incompatible entities right from the beginning. Modernity and its radicalizations as well as its internal and external conflicts and aporias often appear in Genzken's work as anachronistic, doomed but dignified

characters of obsolete historical circumstances - like Burt Lancaster in *// Gattopardo* or John Wayne in *The Shootist*.

In the twenty-first century, however, Isa Genzken also began to produce hybrid forms that capture the results of this process; the confrontation of narration and pure form became rarer. In this sense, the work discussed here - "4 Türme, 3 Stelen" - once again seeks with particular force to lay bare the elements that underlie her work of the last twenty years. Here too, we can speak once again of three levels, which cannot, however, necessarily be identified with the three ontologies of the street. The seven buildings might be seen as three modernist and four postmodernist architectural models, since the columns resemble the two destroyed (modernist) World Trade Center skyscrapers, while the towers could stand as contemporary high-rise architecture in a Chinese boom city. The musical component of all skyscrapers that was mentioned above, their latent tendency to be experienced as dancing and to actually dance during earthquakes or in disaster films, appears in the work of many artists, not just Isa Genzken's, but here it is consistently restricted to the rhythm of the arrangement and the aforementioned numerical relationships. The musical and rhythmic aspect occurs on the level of the installation; it takes place less through allusions and associations than in earlier works - even if Genzken never imagined New York without its associated dance cultures. Yet the cleaning up that effectively predominates in this ensemble, the tendency toward clarification, this time pushes the shimmering element into the background.

Yet there is no background in this sense: either everything is foreground or everything is backdrop. Precisely in its rhythm, the ensemble gives the impression of being complete, of being fully present and accounted for. The counterworld of this once again perfect modernism and even to some extent standardized and serenely self-contained postmodernism is deployed inside and in the "windows" of little more than a single tower. Mounted on another tower are a vase lightly treated with paint and swatches of plastic film and a Madonna replica painted by the artist, a reproduction of Hans Leinberger's *Seated Madonna and Child* (ca. 1515) from the Bode Museum. But the last tower adds an array of other materials to the plastic film and MDF. These form an exuberant, not in any way hierarchical or ordered collage of various newspaper and magazine clippings, an Ibuprofen package insert, two pictorial compositions produced by Genzken that were perhaps electronically generated, and private photographs. All of this material is placed on the surface that faces the other structures, and only some of it is easily visible. Since one can also see into the tower a little bit, one also discovers that it continues there. Two new, not found images display an electronically generated portrait of a seemingly dead or sleeping Isa Genzken.

In addition, there are newspaper articles accompanied, interestingly enough, by images of a menacing Vladimir Putin that are once again topical today ("Putin attacks"), the annexation of Crimea having fallen in the period when the work was produced. But they also refer to "agitation" and "smear campaigns" by "antisocial networks" and the violence of the mafia. One of the two portraits of the "dead" artist is set against a backdrop of blue and white stripes familiar from those oversize French shopping bags that have come to symbolize the refugees with whom they tend to be associated. There is also a private photograph, mounted in a place where it is difficult to see, of a male individual who is obviously close to the photographer, seen lying on a bed in a red bathrobe and showing his outstretched middle finger to the camera, or to the person holding the camera. A disturbing panorama of personal fears and general threats thus constitutes the counterpole to the two versions of the architectural and social programs of global capitalism. It differs from earlier interpretations of counter-images and counter-installations that Isa Genzken has previously developed as images of the street or the creativity of ordinary people. Earlier, the artist's work frequently contained ensembles that were compatible with a Michel de Certeau and his ideas of a tactics of ordinary people against the hegemony of the city in the context of everyday life: collections of (cheap) toys, of objects oscillating between precious things and garbage, enhanced, painted, lacquered, and pasted with plastic film, but also scattered and loosely assembled by the artist. In her work, these ensembles repeatedly constituted desperately optimistic counter-exhibits and "strategies against architecture," as *Einstürzende Neubauten* called them. They are no longer available here.

Here, by contrast, the street's untidiness forms a concentrated ensemble of anxiety, but it is pushed out of the otherwise immaculate space of the columns and towers and forced into a corner. Only, as it were, the official representatives of suffering or artistic idiosyncrasy retain a privileged place on the projection of the penultimate tower, which could be interpreted as a balcony or balustrade: in one case as a goblet or vase, which is to say as the product of an individual sculptural decorative impulse, and on the other as a pious sculpture of the Madonna. The two objects stand for an extremely conventional notion of the artist, which has, however, come to an arrangement with the order represented by the urban and architectural forms. In this way, the entire

ensemble points toward a central contradiction that has always played a role in Genzken's work but has never been presented this starkly as an aporia.

The eviction of the street as a disorganized society of unattached, free, and dancing people in a permanent state of movement and negotiation was undertaken by modernity and disguised as social progress. This ultimately violent takeover of the street, however, is beautiful in various respects - in an objectionable but impressive form of triumphalism, but also as a backdrop that provided a stage or at least a stage set for the conquest or reclaiming of the street by the (anti-capitalist or romantic or both) cultural movements of the last five to seven decades. In this last large installation, Genzken takes stock of this paradoxical relationship and signals the impossibility of continuing to maintain that tension; at the same time, however, she develops an antagonistic constellation that is tense in the extreme.

¹ See Wolfgang Tillmans, "Isa Genzken: A Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans," in ed. Lisa Lee, *Isa Genzken, October Files 17* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015), esp. 100f.

² Diedrich Diederichsen, "Diedrich Diederichsen in Conversation with Isa Genzken," in *Isa Genzken, October Files 17* 115-16.