

Lena Henke

*Heartbreak Highway*

February 27 - March 26, 2016

Opening reception: Saturday February 27, 7 – 10 PM

... when you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax. (Robert Moses)

The poetry of New York is organ, organ, organ ... organ of calves' lungs, organ of Babel, organ of bad taste, wrote Salvador Dalí about the city, which he found so exhilaratingly irrational and anti-modern that it could only be the capital of Surrealism.

Considering Henke's new installation, Dalí's particular strain of surrealism comes to mind. Not the automatic creation of some of Breton's followers, but the neurotic affirmation of Dalí's Paranoid-Critical Method. This method is basically at play whenever true obsession with a topic occurs. It could be described as an artful imitation of a paranoid way of looking at the world, in which all facts and events fall into the place that the paranoiac has sought out for them. Henke's work here does relate to her fascination with New York urban planning and with Robert Moses and his opponent Jane Jacobs in particular. But, really, it is Henke's delightfully unreasonable obsession with horses that drew her attention to a project on Barren Island and its Dead Horse Bay rather than to another. The paranoiac always hits the nail on the head, no matter where the hammer's blows fall.

Barren Island, located in the Jamaica Bay, was home to a community of rag-pickers and waste workers until the mid-1920s. Pre-Moses, it was transformed from a communitarian place smelling of fish oil and animal remains into the city's first airport: Floyd Bennett. The necessary additional grounds were built by combining tons of sand with the trash that the evicted inhabitants left behind. Even today, these slowly eroding grounds leak waste like a dirty secret. Ten years later, in the mid-1930s, Moses built Marine Park Bridge to connect the mainland and Barren island to the Rockaways. Somewhat simplified, one could say that the bridge functioned as a link between Moses's rational Corbusier-inspired city planning and the grimy, organic underbelly of New York. It was this co-existence of the grandiose and glitzy with the bodily and odorous that fascinated Dalí and appalled Le Corbusier. In his *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas posits the two men's antagonism as an ideological war around the ways in which we cohabitate in a metropolis.

It is obvious where Henke's sculptures range on the Corbusier—Dalí sliding scale. They are hybrids of horse-feet and containers, and, as Henke points out, can also be thought of as doll houses or buildings. There is a horse-foot car; a milk carton which serves as a shelter; a female figure that, in an overdetermination of her

gender, is also a vagina. Madelon Vriesendorp's fantastic representations of anthropomorphized high-rises making out come to mind (her drawing *Flagrant Delit* was fittingly the cover image of *Delirious New York*). Where Vriesendorp's work plays off of the contrast between the buildings's form and their actions, Henke's objects conflate the two into earthy, sexed, breathing things. Her 'buildings' affirm a corporeal and hysterical messiness — un beholden to any fixed form or function. If we stick to the idea of buildings, these not-quite-models are spiritual sisters to wacky projects such as the Long Island Big Duck, a duck-shaped drive-in constructed in 1931 by farmer Martin Maurer, used to sell ducks and eggs.

One of the cattle gates which obstruct and guide the path to the sculptures, has a horse head at its center. Henke first used the same technique of the cast rope in relation to her research into landscaping. Imagine a bird's eye view onto a English landscape garden with its winding paths. Here, this pastoral map is conflated with an urban grid of city streets, ensnaring Henke's sculptures

As we see right now in Williamsburg and Greenpoint, "rational" city planning isn't over. The forms of new buildings allegedly still follow function, but the primary functions are served somewhere entirely different - in the stock portfolios of real estate speculators. Henke's anti-modern symbolism and particular take on American extravagance cast a hypothetical stone of fleshy subjectivity into a lake of architectural conventions based on cost-analysis and standardized form. Let Lena Henke have Robert Moses's meat ax.

She can redesign Williamsburg. In this "new" neighborhood of Greater Horse Shoe Crap let the building code read:

1. All Residential Buildings shall be constructed in the form Animal Hooves and Paws (Architects for higher-rent districts will be permitted to choose from excrement-based forms)
2. City Hall shall be a Large Slobbering Tongue.
3. The YMCA shall be housed in a Friendly Vagina.
4. Mast Brothers Chocolate will be relocated into a series of Provisional Mud Huts stamped from an Ass-Shaped Mold.

- Stephanie Weber