

ISA GENZKEN

Parkett 69 – 2004

The Skyscraper at Ear Level

*The ear is uncanny. Uncanny is what it is; double is what it can become; large of small is what it can make or let happen (as in *laissez-faire*, since the ear is the most tendered and most open organ, the one that, as Freud reminds us, the infant cannot close); large or small as well the manner in which one may offer or lend an ear.*

—Jacques Derrida¹⁾

There's an ear on the side of the building. I wonder what it hears. Set flush against a translucent paneled surface, a monumental ear—or rather, a digital print of one—stands several stories high above the city of Innsbruck, as if eavesdropping on some conversation down below. The fleshy lobe, an arabesque wisp of hair, the shadowed recess spiraling into the depths of the tympanum all stand in marked contrast to the featureless stripped-down side of the building upon which it appears. The ear is visible from inside the new, adjacent hotel with its shopping complex on the ground floor but is more difficult to read outside at street level. But whatever dissonance exists between the ear and the building—the one, a delicate, erogenous zone, the other a chill, inorganic presence—we, as viewers, tend to treat the two together. We see them as indivisible. The ear belongs to the building. Or maybe the building belongs to the ear. We don't read the ear as a surface ornament of the building—like the decorated shed of Robert Venturi's Postmodern architecture—but somehow, as contig-

PAMELA M. LEE is Associate Professor of Art History at Stanford University. She is the author of *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000) and *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (also published by The MIT Press, 2004). Her writing has appeared in *October*, *Artforum*, *Grey Room*, and *Texte zur Kunst*.

PAMELA M. LEE

uous with our experience of that architecture. We might call this architecture at “ear level”: at the threshold where the interior space of mental life represented by the ear—generally conceived as private—is intertwined with the public space of the architectural environment, experienced in stereo. Somewhere between the inside and out is the space occupied by the work of Isa Genzken, the artist who placed the ear on the building in 2002.

Let's admit the ear seems a strange opening into this discussion. It is strange because, as a motif, its appearance seems out of sorts from what we usually think of Genzken's architecturally-inflected sculpture: her brusque concrete fragments of the eighties, the minimalist fenestrations from the early nineties. More lately she has shown fields of “models” on



*ISA GENZKEN, OHR, 2002, Digitaldruck auf Hochleistungsfolie, 5,8 x 3,9 m, Aussenprojekt Innsbruck /
EAR, digital print on high-performance foil, 19 x 12¹⁰/₁₂', outdoor project, Innsbruck.*



ISA GENZKEN, NEW BUILDINGS FOR BERLIN I, 2002, Glas, Klebeband, Silikon, 220 x 60 x 45 cm / glass, adhesive tape, silicon, 86⁷/₈ x 23⁷/₈ x 17¹¹/₁₆".

ISA GENZKEN, NEW BUILDINGS FOR BERLIN II, 2002, Glas, Klebeband, Silikon, 220 x 60 x 45 cm / glass, adhesive tape, silicon, 86⁵/₈ x 23⁵/₈ x 17¹¹/₁₆"



plinths: rainbow prisms of glass, foil and tape as in the NEW BUILDINGS FOR BERLIN (2001) or the vacation-home-by-way-of-the-fun-house aesthetic suggested by the works in the exhibition "Urlaub" (2000) or the ersatz skyscrapers, noisy with color and junk, that comprise FUCK THE BAUHAUS: NEW BUILDINGS FOR NEW YORK (2000). And it is the eye, not the ear that we tend to associate with this work. The eye's movement of scanning the horizon of Genzken's sculptural objects seems analogous to the kinesthetic dimensions we bring to our experience of architecture in general. As Beatrix Ruf has persuasively written, "the importance and role of the 'eye level' from which we perceive her sculptures" is that of "a kind of filmic movement of the works themselves."²⁾ The "eye-level" perspective of Genzken's work, like that of Bruce Nauman's, is the perceptual horizon from which we conceive our individual relationship to architecture.³⁾

This is hardly to deny the eye for thinking about Genzken's art, but somehow, in leaving the ear out of the picture, we get only half the story. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us, it is in the communion and integration of the senses that perception occurs; and the body, as much as it is a seeing body, is also "an object which ... reverberates to all sounds."⁴⁾ Attention to the ear might complete an understanding of Genzken's practice. If the eye's relationship to the human sensorium is binocular, facilitating the forward trajectory of our bodies as we move through space, the ear's implication of that space is stereographic, in the round. And because the ear is "the most open organ" as Derrida points out, it is a liaison between the self and the environment that is always porous, always ready to receive. At the same time, Derrida identifies the ear as "the most tendered" organ, suggesting something of the intimacy that it represents. Sensitized to register the external vibrations of the environment, the ear also internalizes the world outside it: it is a figure of the inside out. It is with this kind of perceptual balancing act (as Rita Kersting observed of Genzken's art, the ear is an instrument of balance⁵⁾) that we begin to grasp how Genzken appeals to the gendered dimension of architectural space relative to the mythic divide between public and private.



ISA GENZKEN, X-RAYS, 1989, aus einer Serie von 9 Röntgenaufnahmen, Schwarzweissphotos, jeweils je 1 mal in den Größen 62 x 50 bzw. 108 x 80 cm / from a series of 9 X-rays, b/w photographs, each in 2 sizes: 24 7/8 x 19 1/16 x 31 1/2" and 42 1/2 x 31 1/2".

Making that leap demands a brief review of the ways in which Genzken both inherits and departs from Minimalism and the generalized discourses of phenomenology around which it flourished.⁶⁾ Genzken's practice is unambiguous in its engagement with Minimalist sculpture, not just in terms of her works' finish and geometries, but also in how she dramatizes issues of scale and space for the viewer. She does this by rendering explicit that which was inchoate to Minimalism's theory of reception: its references to architecture. Indeed, following Carl Andre's call for "sculpture as place" Minimalism was necessarily an art of location: of the ways in which the body calibrated space as it was shaped by those sculptural objects in the museum or gallery or outdoors. The movement of the body in space served to register



that relationship, which shifted continuously depending on the range of environmental and temporal conditions informing the encounter.

But critics of the Minimalist legacy have argued that the body relating to that space was largely represented as an idealized or neutral (perhaps neutered) body. If spatial perception was contingent on the ever-changing conditions of the environment, the body was nevertheless regarded as socially unmarked, without gender, ethnicity or class. Even still the contemporary criticism around Minimalism pointed the way to that thinking by alluding to the terms of public and private space in the work's reception. Genzken's art insists upon the shifting values of public and private; and the artist advances this critique in thematizing Minimalism's architectural

dimensions. An ear-level perspective of her work gains particular access into that space.

Consider, for instance, a few of Genzken's extra-architectural works, the things that don't immediately fall under the rubric of "architecture," or "buildings" or even just plain old "space." These objects, which include chairs, videos, and clothes, constitute a considerable part of her oeuvre and cannot be merely dismissed as one-offs relative to the rest of her practice. This is especially so with her photographs. Genzken's first venture into the medium in 1979 included (and not incidentally) pictures of hi-fi systems appropriated from newspaper advertisements, which she described not only in terms of sound and music but also "their very own strong form."⁷⁾ But the photographs that followed in 1980 more pointedly call up the problematic of inside and outside, private and public coextensive with her more architectural work. It was a series of women's ears. Walking down the streets of New York, a city she loves well for its skyscrapers, Genzken would ask random women pedestrians if she might take a picture of their ear. None, she claimed, refused or was offended by the odd request. For Genzken, the images represented "Something organic. Something from the inside out. Coming from the head."⁸⁾ The photographs engender a paradox: Genzken asked women strangers to expose their ears, a rather delicate organ, as she encountered them on the highly trafficked, expressly public streets of Manhattan. The identities of the women pictured are anonymous, but there's a certain intimacy in the ears represented: each is different, some sport distinctive earrings, a tendril of hair suggests the pedestrian's overall appearance.

Genzken's ear-level photographs play upon this oscillation between inside and out, or what feminists describe as "the intimate public sphere." These pictures stage the precarious threshold between public and private life, captured on the very streets lined by the architecture Genzken so admires. It's not surprising that Genzken followed this series with "self-portraits" of a kind—x-rays of her head—along with photographs of the facades of New York buildings. Both represent dialectical flipsides of the same spatio-temporal coin: here an image of the head as an

internal landscape, a “globe” as she called it, is poised in relation to the blunt frontality, the external surfaces, of New York’s architecture.

Much of Genzken’s work of the last few years has progressively collapsed these two registers of spatial experience. With the *Urlaub* series, Genzken offers a perspective into the intimate workings of domestic life and its phantasmatic projections; here, the external constructions of vacation homes act as inverted screens or mirrors for psychosexual desire and fantasies of retreat from the world outside. In brilliantly colored sculptural columns named after friends and associates from 1999—Karola, Daniel, Lawrence, Isa herself—Genzken further meshes the social world of the intimate sphere with forms evoking its architectural surround. For Genzken, those spaces are of the same phenomenal and perceptual plane: they are not oppositional but contiguous.

Perhaps this is why one of the ears from 1980 made an uncanny return of sorts, monumentalized on the side of a hotel in Innsbruck. That work, simply called OHR, recalls one of Genzken’s most oft-repeated remarks: “Everyone needs at least one window.” It’s hard not to take this mandate literally as a call to spatial poetics (and even politics) as determined by the accessories of architecture. To treat Genzken’s work from the inside out, however, suggests a different vantage point altogether. She lends us a window in the form of an ear.

1) Jacques Derrida, “Otobiographies,” in *The Ear of the Other*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln, Nebraska, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 33.

2) Beatrix Ruf, “Contact,” in *Isa Genzken: 1992–2003*, ex. cat., Kunsthalle Zurich (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003), p. 11.

3) Ibid.

4) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 236.

5) Rita Kersting, “Ellipsoids and Grandparents in the Bavarian Forest—Unsuspected Conjunctions,” in *Isa Genzken: “Sie sind mein Glück,”* ex. cat., Kunstverein Braunschweig (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000), p. 51.

6) Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Isa Genzken: From Model to Fragment,” in *Isa Genzken: Jeder braucht mindestens ein Fenster*, ex. cat., Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1992), pp. 135–141.

7) Isa Genzken, “A Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans,” *Camera Austria*, No. 81/2003, p. 17.

8) Ibid.

ISA GENZKEN, *FUCK THE BAUHAUS/NEW BUILDINGS FOR NEW YORK, 5*, 2000, diverse Materialien, ca. 213 x 70 x 50 cm / mixed media, ca. 83⁷/₈ x 27⁹/₁₆ x 19¹¹/₁₆”.

