

# sculpture

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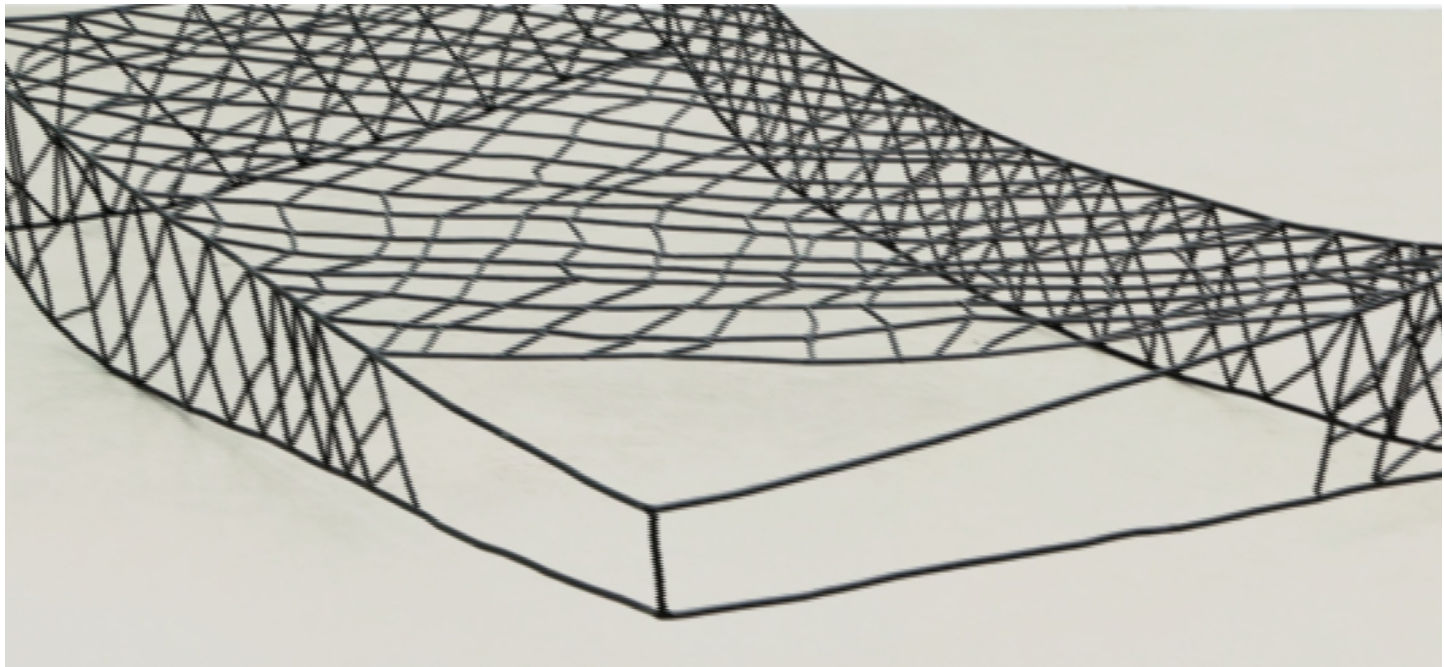
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# Epiphanies of the Moment

LISA SEEBACH

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN





Installation view of "Dear Fear," 2014.

ULRICH BECKER



Above: *From the outside (Welt)*, 2017. Metal and glazed ceramic, 220 x 324 x 40 cm. Below: *Sad machine to produce sad thoughts*, 2013. Metal, glazed ceramic, foam, fabric, and glaze, 220 x 324 x 40 cm.



Lisa Seebach, a German artist whose home studio is about an hour away from Berlin, spent the better part of 2017 as a resident at the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP), a nonprofit space in East Williamsburg in Brooklyn. Her first solo show in the United States, recently on view at New York's TURN Gallery, featured a remarkable body of work produced in both Germany and America. Seebach's improvisatory steel sculptures are linear and volumetric at once, without obvious historical

precedent. The combination of line and volume leads toward what can be described as drawing in three dimensions, but at the same time, the space occupied by the forms is expansive, more or less installational.

Although Seebach's work doesn't reveal the strong influence of any single artist, it belongs to a tradition of welded work that runs from David Smith through Anthony Caro. She participates in, and remarkably restores life to, a high Modernism that

reached its zenith in the 1950s. Her works are directed to the emotional possibilities of form, finding an expressive outlet in improvisatory technical processes and unexpected, assemblage-style juxtapositions of elements. Her lines are not always geometric or linear; sometimes, they become loosely flowing and organic, as in *From the outside (Welt)* (2017), whose scrawled metal line connects a ceramic ball at one end and a long ceramic chunk at the other. Though this spatially sprawling work seems loosely constructed, it is tightly controlled by an implied architectural presence, which comes to the fore in more geometric compositions. Like all of Seebach's works, *From the outside* requires viewers to walk around and through its expansive elements.

Because Modernism and its consequences have established themselves so thoroughly in the contemporary imagination, the problem facing an artist like Seebach is to internalize, transform, and push a normative aesthetic to some other, more creative place. But today's expanded sculptural field gives artists great freedom to experiment with three-dimensional form. Hence, Seebach uses a reimagined vocabulary of Modernist sculpture—which even after close to a century, remains a relatively open site for artists—as the basis for new explorations beyond the historical.

*Sad machine to produce sad thoughts* (2013) demonstrates her additive approach to space- and object-making. The room-size mélange of materials—metal, glazed ceramic, foam, fabric, and glaze—extends in a linear sequence more than 10 feet in length. A low ladder, structurally outlined in thin steel rod, flows down into a basic rendering of a table. A divet in the edgeline of the tabletop supports a long ceramic pole, which descends to an irregularly shaped "mattress" covered in gray cloth (though a portion of the yellow foam protrudes). This inspired, quirky assemblage of shapes and materials demonstrates Seebach's capacity for formal epiphanies of the moment. Such works appear precarious, faulty, and even clumsily built, but they speak to the uncertainties of our time—not necessarily in an analytical or philosophical sense, but intuitively.





Seebach tends to conjoin lightness and weight, as well as opposing poles of density and mass. These contrasts add a considerable complexity to the experience of her work. In *Hide and Seek* (2017), the composition sets up a balance between a tall outline of an arched metal structure and a wedge-shaped ceramic block lying on the ground several feet away, arch and wedge conjoined by two almost-sagging, curving metal lines. The seeming simplicity of *Hide and Seek* belies its sophisticated, complex treatment of linear form combined with mass and suggested volumetric space. Sculpture is really about these qualities, and Seebach manages to construct a unified field in which contradictory three-dimensional components build toward a cohesive statement. In general, sculpture presents itself as a public language—we know that it has memorialized death since its very beginnings. At the same time, modern and contemporary sculpture has often, if not always, constructed a private idiom, hopefully one with resonance for viewers, even when it plays out

Left: *Sometimes night comes too quickly*, 2016. Metal, varnish, and glazed ceramic, 285 x 200 x 67 cm. Below: *The Arrival*, 2016. Metal, glazed ceramic, and castors, 178 x 435 x 304 cm.



ACHIM KUKULIES



Installation view of “Nothing Ever Touches,” 2017.

in a hidden manner. Greater than the sum of its parts, Seebach’s work alludes to meanings potentially both public and private. She is not conceptually driven; instead, her sculptures resonate first through physical and psychological impact, despite their references to Modernist intellectualism.

In the three-dimensional drawing *Sometimes night comes too quickly* (2016), an open rectangle projects from the wall. From that rectangle, another one drops, its lower end set off by a flat, thick band running across the entire width. Two metal lines hang from the top of the rectangle, dropping

nearly to the floor, their ends capped with ceramic cylinders—the only objects of (some) mass in the entire work. Although it is difficult to correlate the poetic title with the bare structure of the work, it eventually becomes clear that there is a relationship between the words and the almost child-like rendering. While that connection is not immediately apparent, it underscores the sometimes-oblique relation between idea and representation that characterizes Seebach’s work. An artist of contrasts and additions, she plays with material juxtapositions to conjure glimpses of metaphysical relation-

ships. The differing elements in her compositions add up to something both unified and discretely separate at the same time.

Sculpture does not suggest a space or an object—it is a space or an object. The reification of its attributes is not imaginary but actual. As a result, it might be said that sculpture is more honest than painting, although such a statement is a bit of a fabrication. Still, the physical reality of three dimensions intimates that it is possible for sculpture to create a physical truth greater than that suggested by the subterfuges of painting. In this sense, sculpture implies



Left: *Overexposed marks through unknown Land*, 2017. Steel, fired clay, and glazed ceramic, 68 x 30 x 26 in. Right: *Nachtmaschine*, 2013. Steel, glazed ceramic, fabric, and castors, 380 x 180 x 70 cm.

very little; while it may suggest many kinds of visual effects, we always come back to the recognition that three-dimensional art embodies a reality that painting can only describe. That is why sculpture is so clearly necessary in today's world of visual misinformation based on the flat screen of the television and the computer.

Seebach moves in the opposite direction. Whatever the intellectual provenance of her work, it shows us how conceptual abstraction can be transformed into something more mutable and accessible. Intransigent improvisation and seemingly carefree manufacture mask a compellingly precise formal intelligence. Seebach's job is to push art forward, which she does exceedingly well.

Historically aware without being specifically so, unsure about the place of

longevity, her sculptures celebrate the provisional, the lightning insight of a moment. There are no signs that Seebach is going to succumb to the anxiety of permanence any time soon. Something in the atmosphere of her sculptures captures the spirit of our time, and that something is located specifically in the uneasy accord struck between formal organization and chaos, with order overcoming anarchy (for now).

In *Der Turm* (*The Tower*, 2015), a rickety steel ladder rises to a wooden platform, the overlook protected to some small extent by metal "handrails" on two sides. This powerful, almost laughably fragile-seeming work begs a few questions, not least about the nature of and need for a watchtower. What would we see if we could climb this ladder (which, in fact, cannot be climbed)? We can

only speculate on Seebach's motives, but maybe it is most truthful to say that the prospect facing the successful climber would merely be the white wall of the gallery. Our future, forever before us, never reveals itself beyond the current moment, when we find ourselves facing implications unknown. *Der Turm* gives little sense of freedom, and an even smaller sense of security, but this does not matter—what counts is the palpable questioning of those concepts by a sculpture meaningful on its own terms. Seebach's constructions remind us that imagination is the only means we have to transform the often difficult circumstances of the real world and find a way to give meaning to confusion.

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