



Isa Genzken
World Receiver

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“My antennas were also meant to be ‘feelers’ — things you stretch out to feel something, like the sound of the world and its many tones.”¹

In 1982, Isa Genzken exhibited a hi-fi radio as a ready-made. She titled the work *Weltempfänger* (or in English *World Receiver*), thereby alluding to the device’s ability to capture the surrounding world of invisible sound waves and render them audible. From 1987 to 1992, Genzken continued working with the piece in the form of a series of small concrete sculptures fitted with antennas – a kind of radios without function. She has emphasized the radios’ lack of functionality as a satisfyingly absurd aspect of the sculptures. They maintain the idea of sculpture as a medium in a receptive and open relationship with the world. Although the series was produced more than 30 years ago, Genzken never fully abandoned it. For example, a small new *World Receiver* cast in concrete appears in *Untitled* (2016)^{*}, which is shown here in the exhibition.

Taking these *World Receivers* as a point of departure, Genzken’s method can be understood as a reception of the world that surrounds us. Thus, she is deeply engaged with the consumer culture and media-driven forms of reality that define our globalized present. Her works thematize our culture’s utopian aspirations and the collapse of those utopias through seismographic registrations of material and cultural phenomena.

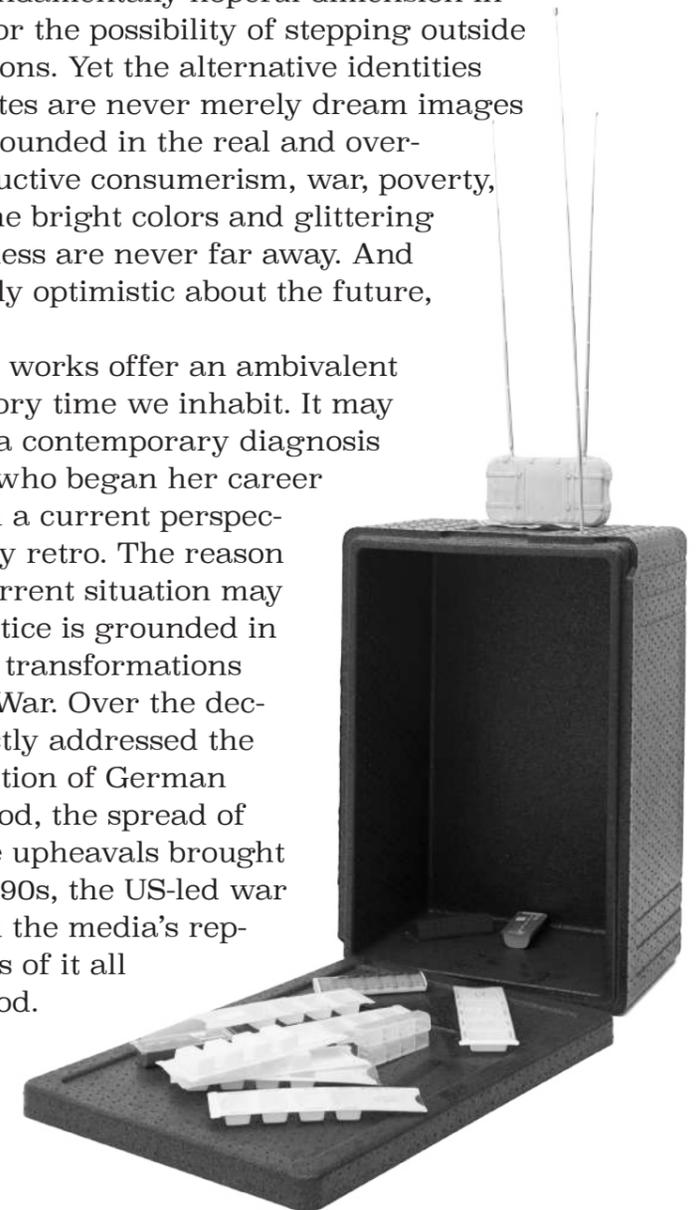
At the same time, ambiguity and indeterminacy are recurring aspects of Genzken’s extensive body of work spanning more than half a century. This is perhaps especially true of the last two decades, during which her practice takes a turn toward assemblage: intuitive juxtapositions and combinations of mass-produced materials, everyday objects, expensive luxury products, photographs and text fragments. In her post-millennial works, she humorously and playfully reproduces a commercial and mediated reality and image flow that is familiar to all of us. The works can be read as a critique of this reality, but they may also be understood as declarations of love and fascination with contemporary culture in all its chaos. In Genzken’s work, both of these positions coexist.

This ambivalence may also be read as a form of radical openness. She rejects the idea that external reality can be reduced to a single, unequivocal formula, instead inviting us to perceive it as a mutable landscape through which one can move and find meaning or lack of meaning. In other words, the works make us central actors. When we engage in interpreting Genzken’s assemblages, we inevitably also interpret ourselves as meaning-producing beings in our turbulent present.

The question of how we define who we are, or how we wish to be, is a recurring problematic in Genzken’s practice. This theme of identity is evident in her disarming use of herself through snapshot photographs, the inclusion of her own clothing in her mannequin works, and title references to friends, colleagues, and collaborators. It is clear that she does not wish to distance herself as an artistic subject from her work. On the contrary, she insists that her messy biographical reality is directly connected to her artistic practice – that reading her work is also a reading of her life, surroundings, and history.

But who, then, is the person that appears in the works? That is difficult to say with certainty, as Genzken deliberately plays with different roles and moves ironically between fact and fiction. Escaping a narrow definition of reality is connected to a fundamentally hopeful dimension in Genzken’s work: to allow for the possibility of stepping outside rigid systems and conventions. Yet the alternative identities and constructions she creates are never merely dream images or flight lines. They are grounded in the real and overwhelming present of destructive consumerism, war, poverty, and exploitation. Despite the bright colors and glittering surfaces, anxiety and sadness are never far away. And yet the work appears quietly optimistic about the future, however weird it might be.

In short, Genzken’s works offer an ambivalent reception of the contradictory time we inhabit. It may seem surprising that such a contemporary diagnosis could come from an artist who began her career in the 1970s and who, from a current perspective, might appear distinctly retro. The reason for her relevance to our current situation may lie in the fact that her practice is grounded in her experiences of societal transformations during and after the Cold War. Over the decades, her works have directly addressed the destruction and reconstruction of German culture in the postwar period, the spread of computers in the 1970s, the upheavals brought by the internet since the 1990s, the US-led war on terror in the 2000s, and the media’s representations and distortions of it all throughout this entire period. She lets the world into her work in a way that renders her processing of it ambiguous – at once skeptical of and seduced by the dream world of mass culture.



¹ “Isa Genzken in Conversation with Diedrich Diederichsen” (October Files 17, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015 [2006]).

^{*} *Untitled*, 2016

Gallery 1 *Temporal Collapse*

Four window sections from a passenger airplane are mounted side by side on the wall. Three of them are hung directly and unmodified, while the section on the far right is painted and sprayed in garish colors, like graffiti on a train car or perhaps like suggestions of an exploding body. The work, titled *Da Vinci* (2003), uses simple means to create the impression of being high up inside a machine hurtling through the air. As an inventor and artist, Leonardo da Vinci was deeply preoccupied with the flying machine as both dream and practical reality. His creative output is also associated with the development of central perspective and the idea of painting as a window onto the world. First of all, Da Vinci is known for several iconic portraits such as *Mona Lisa* (1503-06), one of the most famous paintings in art history. The history of the portrait is an important reference in many of Genzken's works. Da Vinci revolves around gazes – about looking out and in, about open and closed eyes. Another key reference is the terrorist attack in New York in 2001, in which passenger airplanes spectacularly destroyed the World Trade Center and thousands of people lost their lives – a dark aspect of the airplane as a potential machine of death.

References to classical artists is also evident in the assemblage *Untitled* (2018). This work includes a copy of the sculpture *Ruhendes Mädchen* (1826) by Johann Gottfried Schadow, which in turn refers to Bernini's *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* (ca. 1620) in the Villa Borghese. Unlike the historical marble sculpture by Schadow, Genzken's plaster copy is equipped with headphones and an iPod, as if she were a teenager from our own time, and she is surrounded by a heat lamp, a glass sphere, and a piece of pastry shaped like a duck – elements that in an undecidable way appear both simple and mysteriously allegorical. "Humor, Cupid, love, and surprise are the future of modern art," Genzken says in a conversation with art historian Diedrich Diederichsen also quoted in our introduction. In a surprising way, she here mixes mythology, everyday realism, and consumption, contrasting the dreamlike idealization of classicism with the down-to-earth hedonism of the 21st century.



Works

Untitled, 2018 *

Plaster, tyvek, plastic foil, iPod, heating lamp, electrical components, glass, pastry
35 x 150 x 115 cm

Da Vinci, 2003

Airplane windows, metal, lacquer

Four parts:

1. 127 x 106 x 56 cm
2. 130 x 105 x 59 cm
3. 128 x 106 x 55 cm
4. 130 x 105 x 58 cm

Dimensions variable

Sammlung Hoffmann

Untitled, 2016

Styrofoam box, styrofoam lid, concrete "World Receiver", bank note, antennae, sticker, plastic pill containers
131 x 41 x 93 cm

Untitled, 2015

Mirror foil, adhesive tape, post cards, canvas
100 x 100 cm

Untitled, 2015

Mirror foil, print on paper, postcard, canvas
120 x 82 cm

² "Isa Genzken in Conversation with Diedrich Diederichsen" (October Files 17, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015 [2006]).



Isa Genzken / Wolfgang Tillmans. *Science Fiction / To Be Content Here and Now*, 2001
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie. Friedrich Christian Flick Collection

Photo: Installation view from Museum of Modern Art, New York

Gallery 2 *Escapism*

The monumental work *Science Fiction / To Be Content Here and Now* (2001) is a collaboration between Isa Genzken and her close German artist colleague Wolfgang Tillmans. The ambivalence between, on the one hand, longing for a speculative future and, on the other, finding contentment in the present runs throughout Genzken's practice, which consistently collapses time, fiction, and reality. Mirrors are likewise a recurring element in her work, and here the gesture is taken to spectacular heights: the two mirror blocks, each five meters long and respectively three and four meters high, create an immersive scenography in which the viewer is inevitably inscribed as an actor. The mirrors evoke club culture, dance studios, and architectural glass façades, making it impossible to view the work without also viewing oneself.

The photograph on the back wall depicts Tillmans's studio in the early morning light after a party. The room is empty, and the abandoned scene triggers a touch of melancholy – the party, a moment of escapism, is over. The vanity of mirroring oneself, which also has a place in Genzken's subtle flirtation with the fashion world's staging, is inseparably linked to the transience of the party. The strict minimalism of the mirror walls is displaced by the viewer's presence, and geometry gives way to the atmospheric and playful: standing between the two blocks multiplies one's reflection infinitely, and the architectural basic form of the blocks dissolves itself.

Works

Untitled, 2016 *

Shirt, metal, lacquer, tape, plastic, paper

110 x 99 x 10 cm

Isa Genzken / Wolfgang Tillmans

Science Fiction / To Be Content Here and Now, 2001

Genzken: Mirror on wooden construction

Two parts: 400 x 100 x 500 cm and 300 x 100 x 500 cm

Tillmans: *Wake*, 2001, inkjet print on paper

545 x 807 cm

Schauspieler, 2012

Mannequin, metal, plastic, glasses, baseball cap,

toy figure, artificial hair, plastic foil, adhesive tape, glass

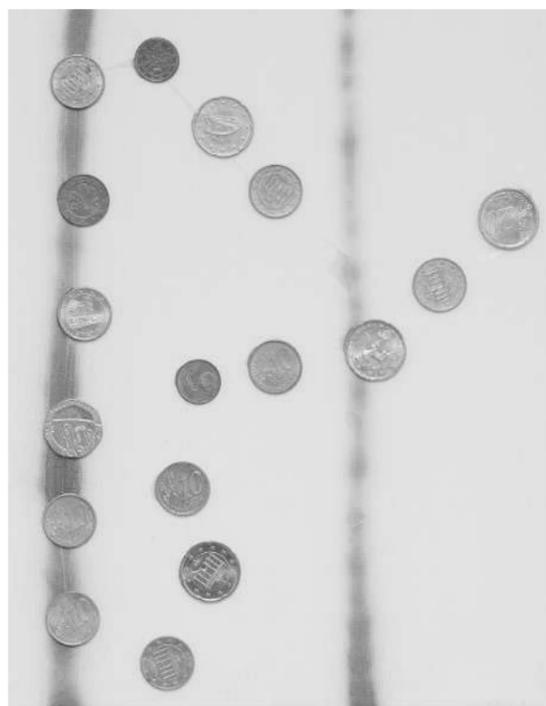
194 x 65 x 60 cm



Gallery 3 *Image Economy*

The painting series titled *Geldbilder* (2014-2016) consists of works that combine paint and money. Genzken's appropriation of banknotes and coins is in continuation of her ongoing engagement with assemblage. The works literalize the banal truth that economics and art (and perhaps painting in particular) are inextricably linked. But Genzken's pointing to and potential undermining of painting as a commodity is more complex than that. First, the sums of money in the paintings are relatively modest. In a few works, a 50- or 100-euro note appears, but in most cases only a few small coins; barely enough for a cup of coffee. The images thus point just as much toward scarcity or even poverty. In a European context where economies are increasingly digitalized, material banknotes and coins also carry a slightly nostalgic aura. The money appears like an outdated or foreign form of value, leftovers from a past that is no longer with us.

Above all Genzken employs currency for its visual and compositional qualities. She uses it as a counterpoint to abstract painterly gestures or distributes it across empty white canvases. The coins and notes create abstract structures or star charts, such as in a work reminiscent of Francis Picabia's dot paintings from the late 1940s. In other works, they accentuate figurative elements, as in an overpainted photograph of Jesus on the cross, where the twisted lower body is replaced by coins. One painting includes an old mobile phone; another retro technology in the age of social media. Photographs of Genzken herself also appear in several of the paintings, blending reality and role-play. In various ways, the images create an in-between zone where painterly value, economic value, technologies, and autobiography mutually illuminate one another.



* *Geldbild XX*, 2014

Works

Geldbild XX, 2014 *

Coins, acrylic on canvas
30 x 23,5 cm

Geldbild VI, 2014

Bill, acrylic on canvas.
80 x 30 cm

Geldbild X, 2014

Bank notes, coins on primed canvas
60 x 60 cm

Geldbild XIII, 2014

Coins, acrylic on canvas
80 x 30 cm

Geldbild XIX, 2014

Coins, acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 cm

Geldbild XXIII, 2014

Coins, acrylic on canvas
30 x 23,5 cm

Geldbild XXXI, 2014

Acrylic on canvas, cell phone
80 x 80 cm

Geldbild XXXIV, 2014

Coins, printed paper, acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 cm

Geldbild XXXIX, 2014

Coins, acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 cm

Geldbild XLII, 2014

Bill, printed paper, acrylic on canvas
40 x 40 cm

Geldbild LIV, 2014

Bills, coins, photograph, printed paper,
acrylic on canvas
70 x 70 cm

Geldbild, 2014

Bank notes, coins, photo print, mirror glass,
glass, plastic, oil on canvas
80 x 60 cm

Untitled, 2017

Installation of three mannequins, clothes,
shoes, fabric, three leather armchairs, glass
table, spray paint, books, mirror
Dimensions variable
approx. 230 x 500 x 400 cm

Untitled, 2014 - 2016

Mixed media, coins, watch, paper, foam,
spray paint, oil on canvas
2 parts: 30 x 40 x 4 cm and 30 x 40 x 8 cm

Untitled, 2016

Wooden roller, wooden hand, cord,
holographic foil, tape, banknote, coins,
spray paint on canvas, umbrellas with
pray paint
Wall piece: 90 x 95 x 17 cm
Umbrellas: 65 x 180 x 90 cm



The Poverty, 2009. Courtesy Galerie Buchholz

Gallery 4 Spectacles

The sculptural installation *Untitled (4 Türme, 3 Stelen)* (2015) imitates both the skyscrapers of the metropolis and stacks of goods in a supermarket or department store. The tall MDF structures are clad with packaging, photographs, newspaper clippings, and glittering surfaces, accompanied by kitschy plastic icons as well as a plaster replica of a German renaissance artist depicting Mary with the Christ Child. Images of skyscrapers are also wallpapered onto the sculptures, imitating the very architecture they depict. The works suggest Genzken's ambivalent critique of and fascination with the capitalist city's architecture and glitzy façades. Her engagement with urban space has been a constant since her concrete sculptures of the 1980s, which commented on the reconstruction of postwar Berlin. Some of the newspaper clippings included in the work appear strikingly current today: Facebook, already described in 2015 as an anti-social medium, and a front-page featuring Putin's invasion of the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine. Genzken also unsentimentally inscribes herself into the media chaos by including intimate snapshot photographs from her own private life. The work testifies to her seismographic sensitivity to the stories produced by the media and reflect on contemporary phenomena that are shaping history.

The Poverty (2009) consists of a scenographic arrangement of sleeping, punctured bodies screened off by a toppled windbreak. A large-scale photograph of masked carnival figures in Venice links to the Commedia dell'arte tradition and its archetypal characters, and masks and wigs on the sleeping figures recall this same tradition. The reference to Michael Jackson on the sign entangles the myths and fictions surrounding the pop star with the already chaotic scene and renders the reading of the work ambiguous and playfully unstable, almost zany. It prompts us to reflect on why reality is the way it is, and which power relations produce it. The two works illustrate Genzken's unique approach to assemblage: a dual interest in the formal aspects of mass-produced, prefabricated objects and in what narratives or affects emerge when they are placed in unusual combinations.

Works

Untitled (4 Türme, 3 Stelen), 2015 *

Installation of seven parts (four towers, three columns), MDF, plastic, mirror foil, glass, cigarette, tin foil, spray paint, plaster, acrylic, adhesive tape, photographs, metal, aluminium, paper. Dimensions variable, approx. 337,5 x 360 x 300 cm

The Poverty, 2009

Installation, plastic foil, four metal bars, two glass plates, two carpets, rubber mask, hat, wool coat, cotton cloth, Neopolen, spray paint, wigs, artificial fur, fabrics, two tin cans, coins, feather, felt pen on cardboard, color print, plastic skull, lacquer, velvet jacket, pillow, plastic cherrys, thermal blanket, door mat

Dimensions variable

Untitled, 2016

Cardboard, plastic, printed paper, felt pen, photograph

Two parts: 130 x 90 x 10 cm and 22 x 33 x 3 cm

Untitled, 2012

Wrapping paper, colour print, acrylic paint, tape, mirror foil, perspex

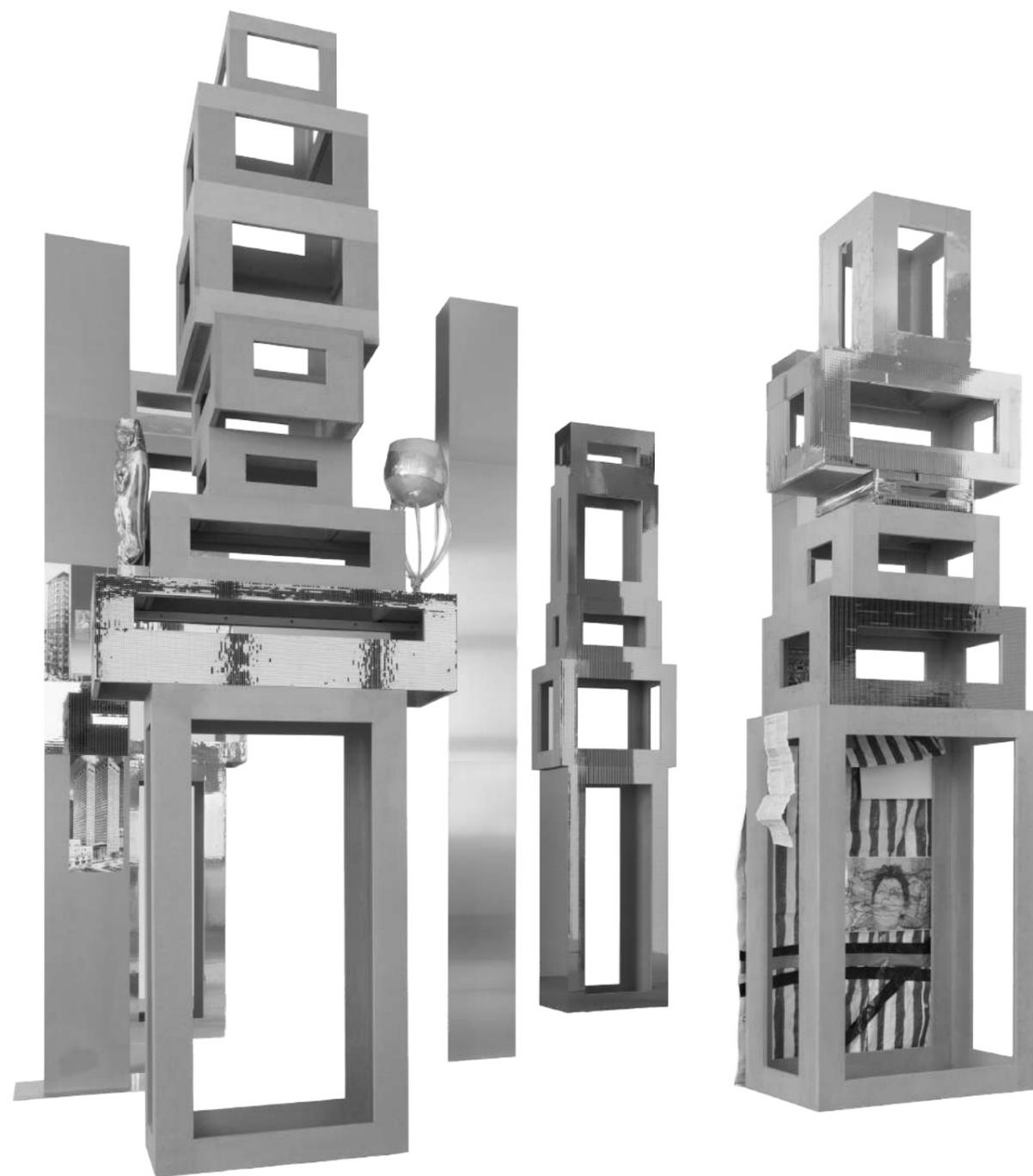
201,2 x 279,3 x 4 cm

Untitled, 2012

Wrapping paper, wall paper, perspex, adhesive tape, lacquer,

colour prints, mirror, framed b/w-print

275,4 x 418,5 x 12 cm



* *Untitled (4 Türme, 3 Stelen)*, 2015

Gallery 5 Scenes

Since 2012, Genzken has been working with mannequin figures of the kind normally encountered in clothing stores. She often transforms these mannequins by placing them in relation to one another to create small scenes or dramas. This dramatization or fictionalization is underscored by the titles. *Schauspieler III, 3* (2015) invites us to see the mannequins as actors, while *Film Set* (2015) makes them appear as part of movie production. Through her staging of the mannequins, their status as idealized consumers thus take on a more indeterminate character: They are no longer merely commercial “models,” but also fantastical future subjects embodying other possible narratives.

The fantastical aspect is heightened by the way they are dressed up and reshaped in humorous and grotesque mixtures of fashion clothing, wigs, packaging, cheap plastic products, and much else that both exceeds everyday conventions and the fashion world’s experiments. The mannequin installations combine both adult and child models; the figures are at once gendered and genderless, while their costumes dissolve binary categories in favor of a more chaotic blending. Viewed individually, it is perhaps above all their isolation or introversion that stands out, their alienation from the surrounding world and perhaps also from themselves. Genzken effectively exploits the mannequin’s potential as a psychological projection surface for feelings and thoughts, while simultaneously exposing that projection as a fiction that ultimately depends on the viewer’s perspective. They raise questions about what it means to have an identity in a modern world defined by performance and mass consumption; where everything constantly changes its look, yet paradoxically remains the same.



Works

Untitled, 2018 *

Installation of five mannequins, garments, ladder, plastic tube, glasses, adhesive tape, printed paper, plastic foil, foam material, spray can
Dimensions variable

Schauspieler III, 3, 2015

Installation of nine mannequins, mixed media
Dimensions variable, approx. 196 x 275 x 268 cm

Film Set, 2015

Installation of five mannequins, mixed media
Dimensions variable, approx. 172,7 x 604,5 x 274,3 cm

Untitled, 2015

Installation of two boy mannequins, metal stand, black-and-white wig, blond wig, fluorescent yellow vest, teal t-shirt, spray paint
Dimensions variable, approx. 132 x 45,7 x 66 cm

Untitled, 2018 *

Gallery 6 *Exposure*

The photo-collage series *Der Spiegel III* (2003-2004) consists of 103 cut-out press photographs from the politically influential German magazine *Der Spiegel* and is shown here for the first time. The series comprises reproductions of press photographs depicting the Iraq War (2003-2011) as well as other modern wars going back to World War II. Focusing especially on the period around the turn of the millennium, the series marks a shift in which the media, alongside the spread of the internet, increasingly became co-producers of political reality in real time. But more generally, mediatized images of military acts have contributed to the naturalization of war as something inevitable and even normal. The quantity of images and the sober, repetitive logic of the installation underscore and invites us to think about this media reality.

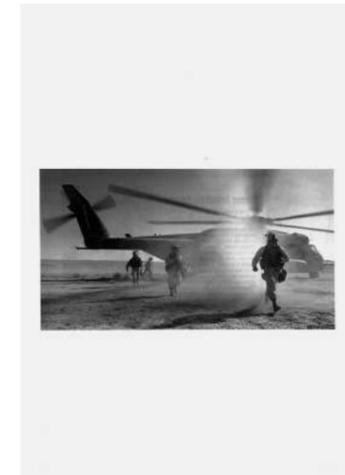
Beyond the specificity of the Iraq War, referencing the United States' role as an imperialist military power, the series also points to the universal horror of the war business. By reproducing the press cut-outs without accompanying text, Genzken leaves it to the viewer to contextualize the images, while simultaneously problematizing the ethical complexity involved in exposing and viewing the suffering of often unnamed individuals. She short-circuits the journalistic logic of the newspaper medium, both puncturing and intensifying the effect of the press image.

Works

Der Spiegel III, 2003-2004 (detail)

103 parts, collage on cardstock

Each 29.7 x 21 cm



Outdoors *Moon Antenna*

Since 2025, the entrance to Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art has been illuminated by the 16-meter-tall sculpture *Vollmond* (1997-2023), which Genzken originally created for Skulptur Projekte Münster in 1997. In Copenhagen's urban space, the sculpture can seem a bit alien, like a grotesque streetlamp or maybe an enlarged antenna for capturing energies from the universe? Above all, the work refers to the moon, a celestial body that it both doubles, brings closer, and subtly undermines. In a short text about the sculpture, Genzken writes about the many romantic and mythological ideas that humans have attached to the full moon over millennia:

“The moon is the origin of countless myths, the cause of innumerable stories, and a catalyst for strange events. Since we were children, it has been the planet of our longings. Humans have always gazed toward the night sky. The dream of exploring distant stars and planets is ancient and persists to this day ... At the very least, there is a widespread belief that the moon possesses special psychological powers to which we are defenseless.”³

Among these “psychological powers,” she highlights the moon's ability to make people moody, melancholic, beside themselves. Genzken's full moon (or moon antenna) plays on these romantic connotations while simultaneously exposing the moon as a simple theatrical backdrop: a construction of steel, glass, and electricity.



³ Isa Genzken: “Vollmond”

(Isa Genzken. *Projects for Outside*, Germany: Koenig Books, 2020 [1997], 165).

Isa Genzken *Biography*

Isa Genzken was born in 1948 in Bad Oldesloe, Germany, and completed her studies at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 1977. Over the nearly five decades since, Genzken has continuously rearticulated and expanded her practice across a broad material and medial vocabulary, and has sustained international recognition, establishing her as one of the most defining artists of her generation. She has previously exhibited at Den Frie as part of the group exhibitions *Becoming Animal* in 2018 and *Another Surrealism* in 2022. *World Receiver* is her first institutional solo exhibition in Scandinavia.

Alongside her participation in numerous group exhibitions, Isa Genzken has been the subject of many solo exhibitions and surveys, notably at The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Kunstmuseum Basel; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Concurrently, her work has been shown at large-scale international exhibition formats such as documenta, Kassel, and Skulptur Projekte Münster, as well as at La Biennale di Venezia, where she represented Germany in 2007.



Isa Genzken

World Receiver

Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art

06.02. – 05.04.26

Works

The works by Isa Genzken are kindly on loan from Galerie Buchholz and the artist, unless otherwise noted

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Thank You to Lenders

Galerie Buchholz
Sammlung Hoffmann, Berlin
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie. Friedrich Christian Flick Collection

Thank You

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