

CURA.

OLGA BALEMA

by Chris Sharp



Much has been made of Olga Balema's relationship to such binaries as interior and exterior – this binary being something the Ukrainian-born, California-educated, and Berlin-based sculptor deftly does away with in her appreciably formless sculptural practice. Various cannibalistic, membranous, shell or skin-like, the work is known to use and take on a heterogeneity of materials, procedures and forms. These range from rusting steel and textiles to elongated latex gloves to flat, transparent sacks of water filled with disintegrating objects. Strangely perverse and weirdly, if theoretically erotic (the perverse, at least formally speaking, is always erotic), her works often refer to the body, the female body in particular ('her' being a pronoun which figures a lot in titles), and its supposedly isolated relationship to the immediate world around it. She has been known to show and is often grouped with what are known as post-internet artists, but while the production of some of her peers might sit quite comfortably within this alternatively celebrated and reviled category, hers, I would argue, does not. This is due to two main but interrelated reasons. One is that nothing about this work, neither materially nor conceptually, seems to privilege contemporaneity as an automatic, (non) critically autonomous value in and of itself, as if the mere identification and representation of the contemporary were some great, aesthetic achievement (even Warhol, diva of contemporaneity, understood the importance of transformation, no matter how slight). And secondly, her sculpture is not only historically aware of a tradition of sculpture as such, but also actively engages and contests it.

Decidedly, if doubly transformative, Balema's engagement can be perhaps most obviously and immediately perceived in the 'dialectical' quality of her work. By dialectical I mean in the sense used by Robert Smithson, who deployed it to valorize the mutable qualities of certain works of art, which are given to some kind of evolution, organic or otherwise. From the rust of watered steel and textiles to the disintegration of various materials, such as cloth, garden ornaments and chili peppers inserted inside, broad, flat water-filled sacks, decay or deterioration seems to be the dominant dialectical mode of this work, in so far as it does evolve. Traditional notions of sculpture may be characterized by many things – even Serra's monoliths are subject to rust – but a degradative instability combined with a comparative fragility (e.g., puncturable sacks of water) are not common among them. As such, there is something at once anti-sculptural, in so far as it is mutable and therefore impermanent, and consummately sculptural about what Balema does. To the pedigreed trifecta of Lynda Benglis, Bruce Nauman and Alina Szapocznikow identified by Quinn Latimer in her April 2015, Artforum Opening on Balema, I would add the likes of Eva Hesse, by virtue of the pseudo-organic and membranous quality of her work, and Smithson himself as a die-hard dialectician.

Of course, such associations are bound to get caught up in more conventional, or one could even consider classical forms of theory, such as *body without organs* or, say, *l'informe* – neither of which are irrelevant to the topic at hand (although with regard to Balema, it is perhaps more precise to speak of organs without bodies). But what interests me more at this point is the many allegations of *soi-disant* eroticism leveled at Balema's objects. Just how is this work erotic? And what does that mean in this context? Well, first of all, as alluded to at the beginning of this text (interior/exterior), questions of permeability, porosity, and entering are among the artist's primary preoccupations. Interestingly, while varying degrees of permeability can be identified in the fact of being human (e.g., food, air, etc.), there are basically only two cases when other human beings consensually enter our bodies: sexually and medically. So either in a state of desire or illness – states which, it goes virtually without saying, share a similar threshold of unreason in so far as both are liable to entail temporary departure from one's senses. It is perhaps no coincidence that Balema's sculptures seem to conflate these two states, rendering them all but indistinguishable from one another. Having already been described as "giant intravenous drips" by Elvia Wilk in her Frieze d/e focus issue 19, May 2015 on the artist, these bladder-like sacks, and their more recent counterparts, *Threat to Civilization* in her 2015 exhibition *Cannibals* at Croy Nielsen, whose forms have gone in a more biomorphic yet corporeal direction, possess a patently ailing, if agonizing character. Never mind that they are on the ground and in some cases, behind white curtains (hospital curtains?) as if they had fallen out of a nearby hospital bed, their sallow liquid interiors are decidedly bilious. If they are surrogate bodies, they are sick bodies. While not immediately obvious, Balema's glove works, such as *Long Arm* (2013), an eleven-foot long latex and aluminum patina-green glove, wields an intestinal quality, as if it could enter great lengths. And although its form clearly resembles a cleaning glove more than, say, a surgical glove, it is nevertheless inherently prophylactic, protective, and consuming.

Finally, to open one more can of theoretical worms, the last elephant, at least to my knowledge, standing in this room is *abjection*. However, I hasten to add, not necessarily in the Kristevan sense, but rather that of Bataille as filtered through Rosalind Krauss. In "'Informe' without Conclusion", a kind of coda to the eponymous exhibition, Krauss takes on the term as applied by Laura Mulvey to the work of Cindy Sherman and responds with her own Bataillean interpretation of abjection. Interestingly, at one point she writes:

Well, as Bataille [...] shows us, it would be a matter of thinking the concept [abjection] operationally, as a process of "alteration," in which there are no essentialized or fixed terms, but only energies within a force field, energies that, for example, operate on the very words that mark the poles of that field in such a way as to make them incapable of holding fast the terms of any opposition.¹

Of course, this merely loops back into her and Yve-Alain Bois's battle axe of *l'informe* (In seeking to define it, Bois writes, "It is neither the 'form' nor the 'content' that interests Bataille, but the operation that displaces both these terms."²), and this in turn loops back to the beginning of this text and the logic of binaries. Given the artist's preoccupation with the erasure of the boundaries between interior and exterior, self and other, by way of, say, cannibalism, or even the collapse of the so-called opposition between form and content, it could be said that Balema's consistent dissolution of such traditional binaries impinges pretty square upon the territory of the abject.

1 Rosalind Krauss, "'Informe' without Conclusion", *October*, vol. 78. Autumn, 1996, p. 98.

2 Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Introduction: The Use Value of 'Formless'*, in *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 15.