

# Frieze

Reviews /

## Olga Balema

### Kunstverein Nuremberg, Germany

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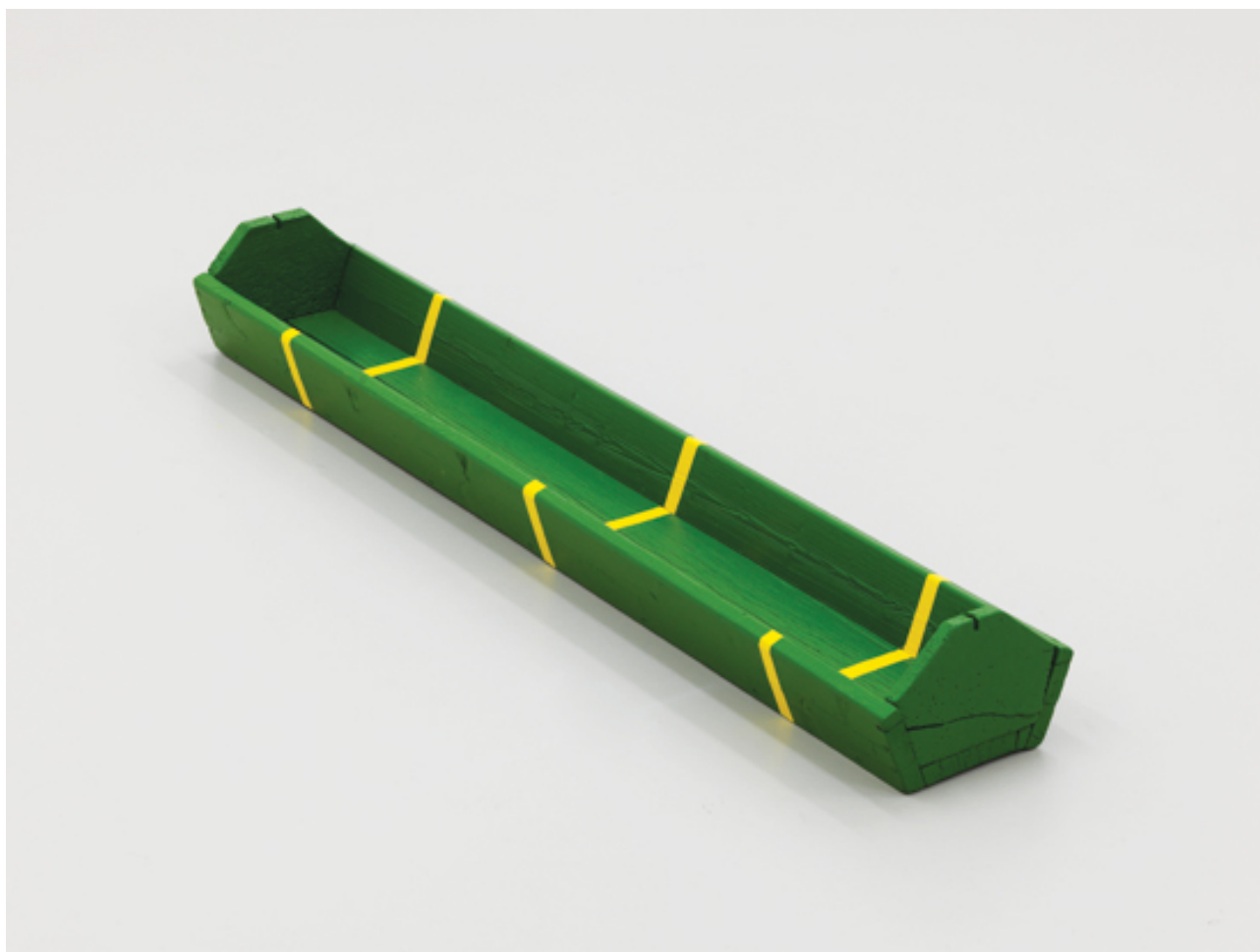


Olga Balema, *Farm State of Mind*, 2015, steel, paint, latex, dimensions variable

Olga Balema's first institutional solo show, 'One reenters the garden by becoming a vegetable', presents two formally distinct groups of works across the Kunstverein Nuremberg's two adjacent gallery spaces. The first consists of seven low-lying sculptures, each a wooden feeding trough painted with a fresh coat of tractor-green and accented in yellow: *Natural submission* (all works 2015) features two thin, parallel yellow stripes; *Cult cultivates* includes four yellow latex casts of vegetables in a line along its basin. Despite the new paint, the rough edges and shrunken and uneven planks of the wooden troughs reveal their age and wear.

Balema's sculptures point toward two types of agricultural production: while the wooden trough is a relic of traditional farming, its John Deere-branded makeover represents industrial manufacture. In the second gallery, the subject emerges even more explicitly. Here, steel sheets dangling from the ceiling each bear the acronym of an agricultural regulatory body, which Balema has spelled out using dried, salted cucumber slices. *Regulatory Bodies/USDA* denotes the United States Department of Agriculture in sloping, sloppy capital letters. Similar treatment is given to the European Food Safety Authority and the World Health organization in *Regulatory Bodies/EFSA* and *Regulatory Bodies/WHO*, respectively. Rust swells in a fungal pattern on the steel around the thin discs of dehydrated, browning cucumber, suggesting the contrast between the power of these bureaucratic

entities and the abject nature of the materials they manage. Whereas political bodies are generally clearly distinguished from actual bodies, here Balema reminds us that state control extends to everything we produce, traffic and ingest, including rotting foodstuffs. Around and underneath these hanging works, Balema places small sculptures made of stylized detritus. Weeds I, II and III couple a pane of steel with long, thin elements poking wildly outwards like sprouting crops, while Serious topics combines a modern feeding trough (industrially produced, in ugly brown plastic) with abstracted pitchforks and a 12-hour looped soundtrack of dogs barking broadcast from inside a crumpled supermarket bag stuffed in the trough. Adjacent is the show's single unpainted wooden trough, Ethical feelings, elevated on a framework of steel.



Olga Balema, *Fresh Hell*, 2015, feeding trough, paint, latex, 25 x 130 x 18 cm

What is Balema suggesting here? The show's title references literary scholar Maggie Kilgour's *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (1990), an account of the ways in which ingestion threatens the essential binary between the inside and outside of our bodies. Kilgour's analysis is premised on the idea that eating fundamentally confuses the distinction between self and other, subject and object, and compromises the fantasy of the autonomous political subject whose consciousness is generated within the confines of her epidermis. She is what she eats – necessarily constituted by the food sources and byways to which she has access. Balema's *Regulatory Bodies* reminds us that those are determined by deeply politicized entities. The exhibition stages a confrontation between our ingesting bodies and the often invisible mechanisms that give them form – from the administrative organs that police the production of food to the iconically branded tractor companies that profit from it.

'One reenters the garden by becoming a vegetable' also marks a conceptual departure in Balema's work, turning away from, for example, the abstraction of the transparent water-bag sculptures that constituted her most recent solo show ('Cannibals', at Berlin's Croy Nielsen in 2015), as well as her contribution to the 2015 New Museum Triennial, towards a more literally representative mode. Every detail of the exhibition conspicuously references agriculture, and *Regulatory Bodies* spells out the subjects of their titles. There is a degree of self-consciousness in making a show today that is 'about' something, in the way that Balema's show is 'about' food. The works' relationship to their referent might read as didactic if it weren't simultaneously so caricatured. Balema's troughs, pitchforks and cucumbers have a directness that upends standard practice in much contemporary art, where obliqueness is considered to be in good taste, and allusions to cultural histories or economies of production are generally exercised in service of a particular discourse or political statement. Balema does the opposite here: despite being so transparently about food culture and production, the show's various elements don't point toward a more profound, conceptual whole. But, I would argue that this is where the exhibition's criticality lies – in its weird ecology of agricultural signs, which ultimately point to the slippery notion of an artwork as being 'about' anything at all.

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