

**Bettina  
Buck**  

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**To Be  
Continued**

BY CECILIA CANZIANI

First, an admission: I must confess that I got distracted, while considering the images of the works that Bettina Buck sent me. I proposed that she would focus on the works that best express the interplay between sculpture and performance by bringing to foreground the idea of the object as ‘prop’ or ‘character’, terms that she has extensively used when talking of her sculptures, and which reveal the inherent performativity of her work.

Her objects are always one element of a binary, mutual relationship, either with the spectator, or with another work, and I always felt that the performative aspect of her sculpture lays in the in between space that consequently opens up.

But looking at the images – or rather questions, as we better call them in this game – to which I would have to respond, my mind went astray, and I started to see the performance of the object *per se*. The silent, secret – albeit visible, since we are talking of sculpture here – life of the works she proposed to my gaze. Their resilient resistance to be, since the moment they are finished, really ‘done’, their trustful compliance with time, that of being shaped, molded, formed by and through time.

Not nouns, but verbs inform modern sculpture and it doesn’t come as a surprise that they are a frequent presence in Bettina Buck’s titles. Titles, I think, are much more than a headline to the work, they are tools that can direct us (or distract us, which is just as good) when we approach an artwork. The verb forms that occur often in Buck’s vocabulary, while alluding to a legacy inherited from Richard Serra, and by extension to Minimalism and its rearticulation of the medium as process, also assert her specific interpretation of sculpture as impermanence.

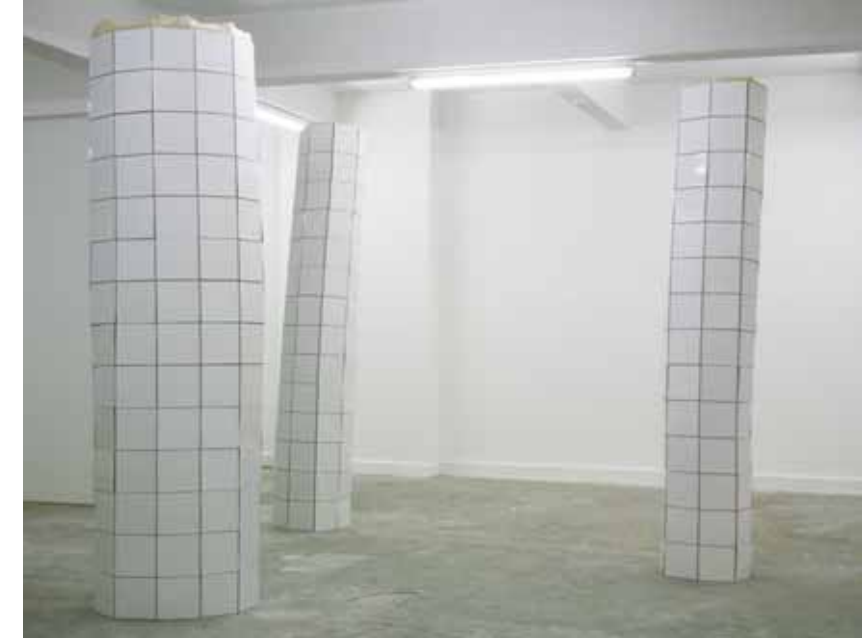


**Fig. 01**

As a matter of fact *In shape, in control*, a work from 2009, apparently contradicts this argument. This is the first image of the selection I received from the artist, one, I have to say, that surprised me for I would not have thought of this work in the context of our conversation here. Nevertheless, upon a second consideration, if we separate out title, form, material, the work strikes as an antiphrasis, a rhetorical figure which affirms something by enunciating its opposite. *In shape, in control* is composed of an upside down wooden table, inside the legs of which a large green space hopper stands. On the one hand, we have a potential movement outside the improvised cage, a tension between two objects, one that is made to move, one that is built to stand. Composed of two elements so different if considering material, colour, shape, the piece stages a dialectical figure, a binary opposition of natural and artificial, organic and geometric, soft and hard, warm and cold, stillness and motion, that is potentially never ending. Yet, the piece is not perceived as an installation: by embracing in its legs the sphere, the empty volume of the table draws the limits of a centrifugal, self-enclosed, three-dimensional object. Nor, is modular and finding in repetition an argument for processuality. The performativity of this sculpture is to be traced elsewhere, as the caption of the work indicates. The balloon, it says, is 'half-inflated/deflated'. A typographical mark separates two opposite positions, one of a collapse, one of plenitude, but this indecision, which is the whole point of the piece, directs our gaze to a movement that is evoked only to be immediately negated. The ball is half inflated, or half deflated, in both cases it is busy in an inward action, rather than in indicating an outward intention.

In Shape In Control, 2009, Installation view of the exhibition In Shape In Control, ROKEBY, London, 2010. Photo: Roberto Rubealcava

3 Upright (first cycle) 2010 - 2012, Installation view of In Shape In Control, ROKEBY, London, 2010. Photo: Roberto Rubealcava



**Fig. 02**

*3 Upright* (first cycle), 2010-2012, is a sculpture composed of three self supporting elements made of tiles, back-coated with latex. During the time of the exhibition the three structures can alter under the effect of gravity, and even collapse. Every time they are shown, they are presented in the form they took in the course of their previous exhibition, while the collapsed structures are re-erected. When all the three structures will be unable to stand they will be rebuilt and a new cycle will start.

While taking the form of columns, a structural element – a metaphor of strength and solidity – the three elements are instead extremely fragile shells where the tension between two different materials such as ceramic and latex is bound to provoke a shift in the order of the tiles, an ever changing form, and finally the fall. The point of collapse is inscribed in the very material substance of the work, and it is then, in the moment of annihilation of the piece, that the nature of its surface is revealed. Indeed, the grammar employed here is that of Minimalism, but the long lasting (*exegi monumentum aere perennium*) slabs of Carl Andre's floor sculptures are replaced by a material – ceramic tiles – that at the same time alludes to low (industrial, poor, common) and high (shiny, pale, delicate), that evokes duration, but cannot last forever, almost repellent yet seductive, tactile, edgy and difficult to be related to. (In this impossibility to locate this piece aesthetically, which is specific to her work, Buck encircles the spectator in an active, encompassing, unavoidable action).

The latex is functional to both the inward movement of the work and to its refusal to be placed in a system of taste: on the elastic surface the order of Minimalism is ridiculed, as the tiles rearrange under their own weight, reconfiguring form as well as disrupting it. Such opposing movements make clear that the interplay between the three elements is only apparent. What we are to look to is not the relationship between the three sturdy volumes, but the inner movement to which each piece in its singularity is subjected to. On the operational plan of the display, in fact, each piece is independent of the others, and only the end of a life cycle brings them back together.



**Fig. 03**

*Wall*, 2009, is a foam-filled cavity between an existing wall in the exhibition space and a newly built wall in front of it. Presented in a group show, or one could better say, hiding in a group show, the newly built wall operates as part of this work and as an actual ‘real’ wall in the exhibition space used for another artist’s work. This piece, that Bettina Buck sees in relationship to *Falling Gallery Surface in Plastic*, realised two years later, as they both relate to the specificity of the site of exhibition, stands in an interesting relationship also with *3 Upright*, when taking in consideration how it behaves with the spectator. In that work the impossibility of a judgement of taste was the consequence of the interplay between two systems of taste, whereas the difficulty to relate with the piece is in its location, in its similar, yet different, in-betweenness. It is again the material that informs the piece and our perception of it: the wall – as the column – is a structural, solid, flat, self supporting vertical element. The foam filling the void between the two surfaces is soft and flexible, tactile and elusive, and cannot stand on its feet without a support. It seems to counteract the architecture of the piece. Yet, in its intrusiveness, it fills the gap so perfectly that the void is perceived as plenitude. We can look at the piece from two points of view, yet each excludes the other. Either we consider the surface, or we look at the side. If we choose the first option, we choose to see its elusiveness. If the second prevails, we decide to look at the apparent tension between its three constitutive elements. In both cases, there is the hint of a resilient action going on as constitutive part of the work,; as something that goes on without us noticing it.

Wall, 2009 Installation view of group exhibition Proposal (Nacht und Träume) for Stavanger, Gallery Opdahl, Norway, 2009–10. Photo: Markus Johansson

Falling Gallery Surface (172 m<sup>2</sup>) in plastic, 2011. Installation view of exhibition All My Mistakes I Made For You, Gallery Opdahl, Berlin, 2011. Photo: Eric Tschernow



**Fig. 04**

*Falling Galley Surface in Plastic*, as it was presented in 2011, consisted of 172 m<sup>2</sup> heavy duty, transparent plastic. The piece changes according to the measure of the gallery, and represents the entire surface of the exhibition space, squashed between ceiling beams. (I should say that I am using the verbs that Bettina Buck herself uses to describe a piece. When she says that *Wall* is a filled cavity, she points our attention to the void as constitutive of the piece, when she says that the plastic is squashed, she evokes an exertion and points at the ‘objectness’ of the piece). This piece is occupying an eccentric position for it is not the floor, the horizontal dimension of the sculpture, or the wall, the vertical plan advocating for painting, that the work employs, nor the tension between them, the corner – the place of debate of modern art – but the ceiling. A space that we block out of our view when we look at an exhibition. However, there, an action takes place and the piece exists until weight and gravity are in balance. We can assume that in the course of the exhibition this piece will change shape, and that the more it will unravel, and therefore destroy its original form, the more it will become visible. This piece, as almost all of Buck’s, actually stems from two opposite forces, the piece exists in the attempt to maintain form and anti-form in balance. This constant effort, is what we perceive as performance.



**Fig. 05**

*Pressed Foam*, 2012, is a very similar piece in the way in which it brings to form tension, by the effect of piling three elements: a 400 kg slate-stone, 3 layers of 0,5 cm foam, on a wooden 64 x 120 x 80 cm pallet. The force operated by the weight of the stone is made visible by a gentle curve, an indent on the soft and velvety surface of the foam. The whole construction seems to be justified by the wish to make a verb visible. To press. Yet, I see a diversion between these two works. *Falling surface* evokes sculpture as process: the work exists as a reification of time as agent of change. In *Pressed Foam* time is a immanent presence. There we have impermanence, and sculpture as a possibility in balance, here instead gravity, a statement, a presence. They express two different modes of performance and ultimately two attitudes towards time.

Pressed Foam, 2012. Installation view of exhibition Interlude, Gallery Opdahl, Stavanger, 2012. Photo: Erik Sæter Jørgensen



**Fig. 06**

Even if the photograph of *Object (proving)*, 2012, was sent by Bettina as a sort of afterward, it might make sense to move it here, and to consider it right after *Pressed foam*, intuitively. Here though, the piece is modelled by the artist, not just resulting from the assembling of elements distant for nature, form, colour, weight. A large parallelepiped has been carefully shaped by the (untrained) artist, then put in a car and driven from London to Berlin where a kiln large enough to cook the piece was awaiting, before being finally – surviving the fire, which could as well have destroyed as well freezing it in its final form – driven back to London by the artist (who, one must say, was behind the wheel for both trips, thus making the journey part of the work, possibly). The caption gives us two dimensions: unfired 80 x 83 x 19 cm, dried and fired 75 x 78 x 17 cm, the gap measures the action undertaken by the object, it traces the process that brought it in front of our eyes, marks its changes through time. The final piece rests on a steel structure. (A biographical note of sorts: as I saw it, this piece reminded me of a work from many years ago to which I am attached, and which I always wished to possess.). The attraction to the *informe* – a category explored by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois in a seminal exhibition, which could be addressed as an attitude common to otherwise very distant practices in 20th century art – which is a significant trait of Buck's work, is to be registered in *Object* not in the material *per se* (foam, soft plastic, acrylic wool, polyester) but in the behavior of clay, when it is subjected to heat. In times of post production, it wouldn't otherwise make any sense to ask an expert ceramist to make her piece, but for the opportunity that this would offer the artist to experiment in first person - and to make this experience visible through the final form that the piece would have taken; the fight that matter undertakes to exist, its precarious presence, its inner tension: an epiphany balancing form and its destruction.

Object (proving), 2012. Installation view of exhibition Bettina Buck invites Peggy Frank, ROKEBY, London, 2012





Streichelzoo, 1998, 2011. View at Friday Late: The Postmodern Look, V&A, London, 2011. Photo: Erika Wall

**Fig. 07**

Hello  
 Please come closer  
 Place your feet between my feet  
 Put your arms around my neck  
 Lean your head against mine  
 Breathe  
 Again  
 Thank you  
 Goodbye

Among the photographs of this performance, this one kept resurfacing when I was selecting which one to use. All are in a grainy black and white that translates well the tactile aspect of the work. All include the artist, dressed in a specially made metallic blue, soft leather suit, and another person, engaged in an action that sees them always in a point of equilibrium, only one part of their body touching. The choreography is directed by the artist who gives a series of (different) instructions, to which the spectator submits. To these days, *Streichelzoo* was performed for the first time at Art Cologne, 1998 and in 2011 on the ground floor of the V&A, London. (A demonstrative performance was also held in Quito, at the Goethe Institute, in the course of an artist's talk that I attended. At that time, I did not know the piece, and even its sort of documentary version gave me a new access to Bettina's work, and I remember the excitement that a newly reached awareness leaves you with). The piece will be performed across further intervals of time, thus making evident that what the artist explores with this piece is not the context, but her own self, since even within a series of given elements – the instructions, the outfit, her posture – the piece will change according to her physical and mental condition that are subject, as it happens to all of us, to time. Now, this very piece is pivotal when we want to distract the attention from a site specificity that I think is incidental and to instead bring back even the most installative works such as *Falling Surface* and *Wall* in the discourse on sculpture that is solidly rooted in the specificity of the medium, yet has an inner and specific performative aspect. Site specificity is not a strategy, in her work, nor an evocation of Institutional Critique, but a constitutive, I would say structural, almost mechanic element of some singular works. This photograph is to make it evident, for the temporary triangular shape formed by the two reclining bodies of the artist and a spectator, is counterbalanced by a white figure in marble on a pedestal, which seems here to serve as reference, context and antithetical term. The performative aspect emerges by the comparison between the permanent marble statue and the body, here taking a temporary position, and in the knowledge that we have that not just the form but also the artist's body, will over time, change. The feeling that all of her works are concentrated in doing something, always, might reside in this: such an aging process is ultimately common to all of Buck's sculpture and in such an unavoidable inner action, all of her works – truly characters – are occupied. To age is not therefore to decay, but to assume an ampler, deeper if different and almost unrecognisable form. Yet, form.