

A Single Whole

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**in: Bettina Pousttchi, *Fluidity*, Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck,
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Fluidity—this exhibition title stands not only for the dynamic force of Bettina Pousttchi's sculptures and wall-mounted works, but also for a flux between art and architecture. The Arp Museum, built by Richard Meier on a hillside overlooking the Rhine in Rolandseck, seems like an ideal place to join the two into a single whole.

Following the model of Le Corbusier's residential architecture, almost all of Meier's soberly dimensioned buildings are characterized by light-filled interiors and geometric forms in his distinctive shade of white. The three-story building has a glass façade facing the Rhine with views of the surrounding scenery—a fine “membrane” that creates an interplay between inside and outside, between nature and architecture.

Pousttchi uses this setting to give her works a stage, a space, while also bringing them into dialogue with the architecture and the landscape. As if following a choreography, the sculptures articulate and define their respective halves of the space, while the walls are animated by objects cut out of painted steel and a series of photographs. The result is a slight but omnipresent fabric that becomes more tightly woven within the individual groups of sculptures and that generates interactions between the works.

Vertical Highways and Tree Squeezer

In the south and north halves of the exhibition level, separated only by a large lift shaft, Pousttchi has placed sculptures from the series *Vertical Highways* (since 2019) and *Tree Squeezer* (since 2018). With these dynamic, large-scale, multiform works, she presents the viewer with an everyday aesthetic that seems familiar by using objects to which little attention is usually paid. Her approach is subtle, compelling, and playful.

Driven by her interest in urban architecture and its site-specific conditions and peculiarities, Pousttchi engages with urban street furnishings such as tree protection barriers, bike racks, crash barriers, and bollards. All these industrially manufactured, functional steel elements are reshaped by the artist in a mechanical process that can only be controlled to a limited extent. Contrary to what many visitors assume, the source materials are not used objects but new ones. Coated in different colors—matte, glossy, sometimes polished to a high shine—they

are transformed into multipart steel constructs, abstract works that redefine indoor and outdoor spaces, either individually or in groups.

The dominant work in Rolandseck is a bright-red four-meter sculpture from the *Vertical Highways* series (*Vertical Highways A4*, 2019), positioned centrally in the space, whose original elements, like those of the entire series, are street crash barriers. Pousttchi removes them from their usual horizontality, letting them extend upwards. Even from a distance, the sculpture recalls an enormous insect, a praying mantis, or a figure walking on tiptoes, trying to move forward with a great sidestep. Its delicate form allows visitors to look through it at the space and at the other sculptures from the same series that are arranged around it, creating almost tangible connections. The works come in many shapes and colors: ivory and anthracite, vertical structures whose individual elements are tightly arrayed, hiding their innermost core and insistently defining their location; while others give the impression of gently shifting from one foot to another, their concave and convex parts arranged crossways. Some humorously recall personalities, individuals. Their matte surfaces appear velvety. The strong colors conquer the space, contrasting powerfully with the white walls.

The sculptures animate their architectural setting; their lightness, mutability, and instability and the way they flow through the space confirm *Fluidity* as a fitting choice of title. The visitors, too, are set in motion, called on to walk around the sculptures, experiencing them differently depending on their position, discovering a succession of viewpoints.

The northern half of the space offers a similar experience, containing seven sculptures from the *Tree Squeezer* series whose titles—*Berthold*, *Käthe*, *Bastian*, *Marie*—derive from street names in Berlin. Unlike the angular, geometrical structures of the *Vertical Highways* series, these conglomerates are based on an organic-vegetal composition. Arranged in groups, they free themselves from their torpor; as if on tiptoes, they seem to leave the ground to perform dance moves. The individual pale- and dark-green elements made of tree protection barriers in various sizes are entangled with one another, appearing to penetrate the glass façade, thus escaping from the interior space—their stage—to merge like creepers with the surrounding nature. Ivy-covered tree trunks, leaves, trees, and the outline of the Siebengebirge hills on the horizon correspond with the sculptures, connecting with them for brief moments, joining in a clearly defined choreography established by association with dance poses and postures. Within this constellation, each individual sculpture in its specific appearance and impact is no less strong than the group as a whole.

Being based on industrially manufactured elements, Pousttchi's works are often considered part of the traditions of the readymade and of minimalism. Via in-depth engagement and a process of artistic reshaping, she creates unique sculptural entities that bear motion and vitality within them.

Drive Thru

Within her oeuvre, Pousttchi effortlessly blurs the boundaries between sculpture, installation, video, and photography without forfeiting her rigorous repertoire of forms and ideas. This is reflected in both her long-term photography series *World Time Clock* (since 2008)—taken in cities around the globe—and the series on show at the Arp Museum, *Drive Thru* (2014). For her installation *Drive Thru Museum* in 2014 at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, she presented sculptures from the museum’s collection in dialogue with her own works in an unusual setting. Taking carefully selected works by iconic sculptors, including Hans Arp’s *Nu aux bourgeois* (*Torso with Buds*) from 1961, she integrated them into her artistic concept in an approach that should be understood in terms of transformation rather than appropriation.

In this case, the dynamic came not from Pousttchi’s works but from the scenery she had devised, in which viewers experience the installation by following a route defined by the artist along a vinyl “street” with a median strip and direction arrows. Inspired by the Dallas street network and its huge number of cars that shape the cityscape, she developed the idea of an imaginary drive-through: people in a slow-moving car watching the arrangement of sculptures slide past over extended moments in time.

This notion of a space–time continuum is captured in Pousttchi’s twelve-part series of photographs *Drive Thru*, creating a lingering echo of her artistic intervention. As high-contrast black-and-white pigment prints, they define a powerful artistic idiom—not documentary images but autonomous works in their own right. Arranged in two rows of six, they emphasize two walls in the left-hand half of the space that are some distance apart but connected by lines of sight. These pictures correspond and contrast with the *Vertical Highways*, while the dominant white arrows beside the median strip stand out, pointing to Pousttchi’s most recent series, *Directions* (since 2020).

Directions

Visitors encounter two of these reliefs at the start of the exhibition. Installed on a wall measuring over eight meters tall, directly adjacent to a set of large windows, they highlight both the windows and the surrounding space with its balustrade, handrails, elevated walkway, and suspended staircases. With their arrows, they point dynamically in all directions, continuing in the right-hand half of the space where they occupy the walls. Playful, poetic, sometimes recalling bouquets of flowers in the process of disintegrating, the objects cut out of sheet steel are mounted at a slight distance from the wall. With varying numbers of arrows in

shades of gray and blue and seemingly floating, they create gentle shadows depending on the light.

In preparation for the exhibition, Pousttchi made the largest relief in the *Directions* series as a reference to Arp (as chance would have it, Arp made a painted wooden relief called *Wolkenpfeil*—Cloud Arrow—in 1932). Placed between two pillars and standing over three meters tall, a two-part composition of anthracite-colored arrows faces the viewer in the Arp Museum. Seeming to disperse in all directions, it recalls palm trees swaying in the wind, a fireworks display, and a rain of light or shooting stars—the work fosters free association and denies orientation. Taken out of their original context, the *Directions*, like Pousttchi's other sculptures, subvert all systems of order, protection, and separation.

Frameworks

Different ordering systems, that create structure in the sense of patterns, greet visitors in the print room. Usually connected with the rest of the space by two windows, this square room has been temporarily sealed off, generating a sense of calm. The *Frameworks* (since 2015), a series of works in fired and glazed clay, connects with this setting in a special way.

Covered with structures that recall Middle Eastern adobe architecture, with glazes oscillating between shades of silver and brown, the *Frameworks* share a certain rigor with Meier's architecture. Together with *Double Monuments for Flavin and Tatlin* (2010–14), a white-painted sculpture made of crowd-control barriers lit from within by neon tubes, they form a contemplative flux. Varying in size, arrangement, color, and composition, the handmade square elements form a multipart wall-mounted work whose origins lie in Pousttchi's engagement with the half-timber houses in Frankfurt's reconstructed old town. In 2012, she made a large-scale work for the eastern façade of the main building and the rotunda in the entrance hall of the Schirn Kunsthalle. Her photographs of the reconstructed façades are arranged here in a pattern she has referred to as "transnational," since it combines the architectural idioms of two cultural spheres, Europe and Asia.

Squeezer

The boundaries between museum space and public space are fluid. Blurring these boundaries is a key interest that shapes Pousttchi's work as an artist, as seen in her permanently installed work *Marianne* from the *Squeezer* series (since 2013), installed close to the Unkelstein Bridge in Remagen-Oberwinter. With this work, she completed the display of works in the Riverside Sculpture Park, a project that began more than twenty years ago with Hans Arp's *Bewegtes Tanzgeschmeide* (Moving Dance Jewelry). Fourteen site-specific works by different artists engage with the location and its historical and sociocultural context,

forming a permanent part of the landscape along fourteen kilometers of where the Rhine marks the city limits of Remagen.

With *Marianne*, Pousttchi follows the basic concept of the Riverside Sculpture Park project, according to which the works should appear at first glance as something not out of the ordinary, only identified as art on closer inspection. This is reinforced here by the way ordinary items of urban street furniture—bollards used to mark and protect traffic routes—present themselves to the viewer as groups of sculptures “deformed” by external forces. Onstage, atop a specially created concrete slab, the objects occupy and interact with their new surroundings, inviting visitors to follow the rhythm and choreography of Pousttchi’s sculptures against the backdrop of the Rhine and the hills of the Siebengebirge.

Here once again, Bettina Pousttchi declares this place a site of flux, establishing compelling links with her exhibition in Richard Meier’s building.