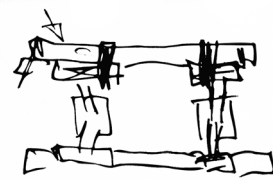


A
conversation
between Christiane
Blattmann and Anna Zacharoff



AZ I was pretending to be you when I read the press text written for your show *Submissive Sculpture*. You did not write it yourself, and to some extent that always brings in elements of surprise, perhaps hope or easement.

CB It was written by my friends Stacy Skolnik and Tom Laprade. It's always such a tricky decision who to ask to write the press text, no? Because what if you get something back that doesn't resonate?

AZ This one paragraph stood out to me as a good starting point for a conversation:

"Loneliness is no longer a private affliction but a global architecture. We are so immersed in systems that define us that we fear we may not exist without them. And yet, within this oppressive matrix, we seek contact comfort. The cloth mother has become a vote, a trend, a job title, a god."

This idea of "loneliness as a global architecture" feels particularly true and evokes both rage and endless memories of walking around in cityscapes not designed for us. When you get lost in one of those areas not made for walking it's easy to see, what in badly designed spaces becomes a vague but constant discomfort. All this power architecture have in deciding how we think, feel, move around and are able to live our lives and that this power sort of belong to what you call "cloth mother"¹ the robot draped in warm cloth that can't nourish. With this specific rage in mind I now look at your sculptures: *Dependers* seems to be made out of two ballet barres mounted parallel on the wall. Between the two barres three objects are squeezed in. It looks like models of skyscrapers or materialized thought of architecture and this does give a bit of relief. Architecture was revenged.

¹ see for example: <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/publications/observer/obsonline/harlows-classic-studies-revealed-the-importance-of-maternal-contact.html>

CB I have the same reactions when I walk through certain cities or neighborhoods. That our physical intelligence, if you want to call it that, tells us even before the mind does, that something was not designed for us to move through or live in. I remember something David Harvey said in an interview: today buildings are often made, not to house bodies, but streams of assets.

The baby monkey had at least the choice between the cloth mother and the wire mother. With a city, we are mostly not given a choice. There's a funny photo of the rhesus monkey, where he sits on the lap of the cloth surrogate and leans over to the wire mother so it can reach the food. The monkey was able to trick the scientists.

AZ This image is however, perhaps not at all how you came to work with these barres.

CB Indeed, all *Dependers* works feature ballet barres, or more precisely, the fittings that are screwed into the walls and hold the bars in place. I have replaced most of the standard wooden bars with aluminum tubes. In dance classes, barres help you keep your balance or posture. As a child, I was sent to ballet classes, and I hated it. But my mother kept saying that it was good for my posture. In German, the word is "Haltung," and I was recently fascinated by the fact that "Haltung" refers both to body posture and to a political attitude.

The barres serve to hold onto in order to keep a posture. "Holding" became another important term that can describe a kind of positive dependence. A holding environment, for example, is sometimes described in psychoanalysis as the space that develops between a mother or someone with a mother function and a child and forms the precondition for the child to go out into the world and find trust in other environments as well.

In the exhibition, I wanted to negotiate all this on a sculptural level. I imagined first that the sculptures are being held by the space, that they are in a relationship of dependency. The formal decisions within the works follow this notion of being in dependent relationships. And I guess this brings us to the objects or skyscraper models in one of the pieces. The only way I found to connect them to the pipes was to squeeze them in-between. That gesture was perhaps a way of making tangible to myself that high-rises, that pierce so confidently into the skies, find themselves also in dependent relationships: to restrictions of statics, their inhabitants, and so on.

AZ If you look at the synonyms for submissive some of the suggestions are: acknowledging one's inferiority; yielding; obedient; humble. Would you ever describe your work as humble?

CB I probably wouldn't use that word (laughs). Although I wouldn't mind someone using it... or perhaps I would. Can an artwork ever be humble? The "submissive" in *Submissive Sculpture* I use a bit provocatively to amplify my use of dependence. It was a useful term, because it highlights that moment of embracing supposed inferiority – that perhaps can be a strength if you look closely.

AZ I can't help but think that they are not ready to submit. They are performing poses of submission.

CB If that's the case, I think they are doing what they should do. They are stubborn and perform submission at the same time. Perhaps this way, they can transport some of the ambiguity in all of this.

But let's say, in a sculptural context – a work forming relationships of dependency with a space or any other context, to me, makes it already richer than claiming autonomy, generally speaking.

The ambiguity in „submission“ was also a way for me to speak of the medium. When we studied, we were told it was completely obsolete. In my art school, it was all about making work that is interdisciplinary, free from any supposed genre restriction. But funny enough, we both also had professors who still found some useful residue in the medium. Even if perhaps conflictual.

Lately, the medium has been on my mind, and it has to do with these questions of restrictions. I'm interested in what appears like a contemporary fear of definition, where committing to certain criteria seems to go against the grain of keeping things vague and open enough to serve a variety of expectations. I wanted to see with sculpture how a medium can also be a helpful concept – perhaps something to submit to, playfully. Rosalind Krauss speaks about edges of a pool that we can bounce off against, which can open up even more possibilities than no edge at all. Still I am not sure if I see the medium in the same way.

AZ Another property that stands out to me is their hollowness. The shapes are forms from objects or ideas. Clothes, pipes, models of empty buildings... hollow railings. The more I sort of stared at this I think it gives strength to the sculptures. They are hollow like shells and ultimately shells are the real estate of the ocean and the defense structure needed for survival.

CB I'm glad you notice the hollowness in the show! I can only speculate why things in my work are often hollow. Perhaps because a hollow object is more dynamic, there is a potential in an inner void. The negative space inside becomes an agent of its own, and at the same time, the objects have the capacity of conduits or carriers of some sort.

You know I always make sawing patterns to produce the textile pieces, and in this show I even took patterns from drain pipes to be able to copy them in canvas. They basically transform a 3d object into a 2d outline. I learnt recently that these patterns in French and Dutch are called patron or patroon. Like a male master, one who „protects“, but also outlines, seems to hint at the concept of delimitation to put borders around something. I wondered if this 2D principle follows a father-principle, would there be a corresponding 3d mother principle? And just thinking of my studio, I thought about moulds, which hold a form in three dimensions. This brings me to the shells you are mentioning.

The mould contrasts with delimiting or outlining: it is more an embedding substance. And here, excuse the free association, but a while ago I did some looking up etymology again and from the mould, you get to the matrix. Which is literally how the moulds for printing letters or coins are called, but also of course it has more meanings, like in biology, the material in-between an organism's cells. But matrix also means womb of course, as well as describing a medium like for example the natural materials like soil or rock in which fossils are embedded. That made me wonder what it would imply to refer to an artistic matrix rather than an artistic medium.

I also have a question back to you: if we think again of the French word for shells –“moules” and link with someone like Broodthaers who used this image and concept frequently in his work, I'd be curious what is your relationship to the void of sea shells and other swimming containers. Also the boxes that you built and painted of the opera houses, that are simulating an architecture: they are at the same time a bit deceptive as they are not a house but an empty shell.

AZ Well in this context I would go back to the hollowness and say that life and thought kind of happens in this hollowness. You neeeded the pool to have a medium.



Fooling of the Fates, 2025, barre holders, aluminum, encaustic on jesmonite, stucco plaster and canvas, 69 × 73 × 33 cm

AZ Needles stands out to me as a material. Am I being too sensitive?

CB Hahaha, I very much doubt you are! The needles are part of a sculpture, in which a textile element similar to a hoodie hangs from the bars and has architectural models suspended from its sleeves. When I built one of the models, I needed to fix the joints with needles while the glue was drying, and I somehow never got rid of them. Joints are often crucial to me and when the

idea of the ballet bars came up, I also found that they functioned as joints between a body and the architectural space.

AZ I read the list of materials for the sculptures, one example would be; Barre holders, aluminum, encaustic on jesmonite, stucco plaster and canvas, archival cardboard. What content lies within the material for you?

CB To be frank, I usually don't like to talk about material. I think that conversation mostly distracts from what's really going on in a work. I mean that not in the way you just asked about needles, for example. More in the way that it is often the easiest for people to ask what something is made of. And I see that my work has a material sensitivity, so that it's not very far-fetched to bring this up. I even think of the material level as an entry point into the work. But once you enter, there should be more.

I studied in a painting class, because I always feared that if you go to the sculptors, they would talk about material and technique the whole day long.

AZ I overheard you talking about watching archaeology shows online. What is the part that fascinates you with these shows and do you have a favorite historical time? At this point I watched so many hours of "Time Team" the roman bath and highways don't really "do it" for me anymore. Instead the earlier periods like the neolithic one stands out because there's so little that gives such a vast amount of information. The experts can look at a tiny piece of pottery and enthusiastically call out it is from Dorset 5th century BC. A tiny piece of flint can tell if people have been living in an area for over 10.000 years.

CB Oohh yes. I remember, wasn't it at one of your birthday parties really late, that we found that we both have a soft spot for archaeology shows. I don't think I have any preferred historical time, but I am fascinated by the layers, the sediments that sit on top of each other and overwrite and confuse each other. For example, at Termini Station in Rome, there is a Renaissance church that was originally built as a Roman thermae. Michelangelo was commissioned to convert the ruins of the baths into a church—and when you look at the vaults, it makes perfect sense. I really like how in archaeology, a form can mean one thing or another. Or how you can see what was more important in one era than in another: praying or washing?!

AZ Yes and lastly I can't help but love this world where the closest thing you can come to a written description of human life is a dirty ditch. What we threw away and how big our trash piles were seems to be an endless source of information. Not to mention the houses were round.

