



Angelika Loderer: Sculptural Contingency in a State of Precarity

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In this essay on Angelika Loderer's sculptural practice, I would like to weave together the thread of art history with that of our present time. Embedded in and emerging from the histories of modernism, Loderer's work is also framed by and in dialogue with the conditions of the present. On the one hand, she belongs to an artistic tradition that activates the performative power of the *informe* ("formless")—agitating the metaphysical opposition between the optical and carnal ordering of the world as much as the modernist delineation between form and content: on this path, her sculptural objects draw on the force of gravity and the lure of horizontality, activate slippages into entropy, and invite detours into the natural world as well as the unseen and overlooked. On the other hand, she is situated in a contemporary moment characterized by the intensified accumulation of capital and by modes of living and working in which contingency becomes the norm. This precarity—or rather these processes of *precarization*—are as much about the global work force's lived relationship to capital as about capital's inventions of new methods to regulate and control existence itself. In this double context, Loderer has developed a sculptural lexicon that incorporates *contingency* as a formative condition. Her oeuvre makes use of materials, processes, and display mechanisms that constantly perform and expose the object's internal balancing act in relation to an equally contingent spectator. In the late 1990s, art historians Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss drew on the writings of renegade surrealist Georges Bataille to bring the *informe* into the present and reflect on what it would mean to read modernism against the grain by situating it as a type of performative operation. Famously, Bataille suggests that the *informe* "is not only an adjective—having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down (*déclasser*) in the world."¹ With Bataille's enigmatic dictum as a starting point, and a whole range of artistic practices as an arena of investigation, Bois and Krauss argue that the *informe* "... is not so much a stable motif to which we can refer, a symbolizable theme, a given quality, as it is a term allowing one to perform a declassification, in the double sense of lowering and of taxonomic disorder. Nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is performative ..."² With this working definition, they set out to reassess the artistic practices of many bona fide modernists, predominantly male

artists working in the North American and Western European contexts—Brassaï, Hans Bellmer, Jackson Pollock, Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, Gordon Matta-Clark, and others. In this immensely significant reinterpretation, a counter-modernism emerges from the internal permutations of its own domain; it is a disruptive force that splits things from within and reorders their classification. Normative bodies are splayed open to reveal heterogeneous desires, rationalized processes of production reveal their own libidinal pulses, and the binary logic that differentiates between form and content collapses to expose a false dichotomy. Perhaps most importantly, the idealized modernist spectator, whose verticality is assumed and assured and whose bodily instincts are dominated by the sense of sight, is called into question. Although Loderer's sculptures draw on this genealogy of the *informe*, they do not erupt into that unbounded or uncontainable "base materialism" which Georges Bataille liked to call "scatology," a volatile energy of slipping, surging, and scattering toward lowness (or, in less unadorned terms, towards excrement). Rather, they perform something else that highlights the radically changed historical conditions. Here we need to be attentive to the current models of labor and governance, which create conditions in which lives and bodies exist in a state of continuous precarity.³ According to political theorist Isabell Lorey, neoliberal global capitalism has transformed precarity from an exception that only affects the so-called peripheries—"outsourced" from Western nation states to the Global South—to the rule governing all contemporary societies. In Vienna or elsewhere, irrespective of profession, we are confronted not simply with social and economic insecurity, but with a type of neoliberal governance that "regulates the minimum of assurance while simultaneously increasing instability."⁴ According to Lorey, "managing this threshold is what makes up the art of governing today."⁵ Yet she also makes clear that there is a critical tension at the crux of this paradigm, "the ambivalence between being governed by others and self-government, as well as the ambivalence *in* self-government—between servile making-governable and refusals that aim to no longer be governed in this way."⁶ In other words, the power relations that structure our present time around precarity and insecurity are not monolithic, but contain within them the potentiality of living—governing and being governed—differently.

Against this background, we can better understand Loderer's practice, which frequently uses the techniques and materials provided by a (modern) industrial infrastructure while tapping into the transformative processes inherent in the natural world. In this doubling of industrialization and nature, the *informe* is very often held in (performative) suspension. For example, Loderer's sand pieces, *Untitled* (2017–ongoing) are quasi-monumental assemblages made of colored quartz sand (SiO₂), which is typically used as the mold material to cast other

objects in various industrial procedures. As biographies of Loderer often recall, the artist produces these objects in a family-owned foundry specializing in sand casting, a detail that elides her life with her art but does not elucidate the meaning of either. In different iterations, the tiny granules of eroded quartz are propped against each other in layered triangular slivers (Belvedere 21, 2019), dangle downwards in circular and semi-circular pendulums inside iron frames (Mia art fair, 2018), or are stacked loosely, in uneven rows, according to color, within trim iron girding (Secession, 2017). Visually, these objects evoke the iconography of minimalism and post-minimalism—an archive of works comes to mind such as Robert Morris’s iconic installation of geometric sculptures at the Green Gallery, 1964, or his sliced, drooping, or scattered felt pieces, 1967–68. With this moment of the 1960s in mind, we can note how far we have come since then: while Morris’s sculptures were outsourced to commercial companies that produced them according to his specifications (1964), or appropriated ready-made materials that were subsequently rendered “useless” by the artist’s interventions of cutting (1967–68), Loderer’s sculptures incorporate living materials that function as part of the chain of industrial production but usually remain unseen. Now at center stage, they appear fragile, seemingly dependent on the support of the metal girding or each other to remain balanced (in fact, the strength of the bonds within SiO_2 renders the mineral extremely robust). This is neither a faithful repetition of monumental minimalist sculpture (what Morris termed “form”) nor its vehement degradation into post-minimalism (“anti-form”).⁷ Rather, the force of gravity that pulls Loderer’s materials downwards—beckoning towards the horizontal plane of the *informe*—is always countered by the visible (artificial) support of iron or the invisible (natural) cohesion of the bonds forming the SiO_2 . Such a contingent *informe* is part of a different order of knowledge, one in which precarity is fabricated and regulated by means of the same systems and processes that are supposed to prevent it. Put another way, what we encounter in the diversity of Loderer’s sand sculptures is a (labor-intensive) performance of precarity, one that is manufactured from the remnants of a Fordist production system at the same time as it is being (or has already been) violently transformed into Post-Fordism.

To collapse into the *informe* in today’s neoliberal global capitalism is to be abandoned by the state to such a degree that self-management, self-exploitation, and self-care become the order of the day; for many, it is to not even merit becoming the subject of the state’s administrative definitions of what is human, and thus to disappear completely from the frame of representation. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the lived *informe* is an untenable yet prevalent reality: it is one of existing on the brink while vigilantly self-administering one’s visibility or, worse, succumbing to a state of dispossession and clandestinity. In this context, Loderer’s sand sculptures

orchestrate a self-reflexive scenario of display. They are situated in such a way that the viewer can physically wander around them and assess them from different perspectives. Though colorful and decorative, they also engender a certain level of anxiety. Are these objects vulnerable to my presence? Will my bodily drift contribute to their collapse? Will I be held responsible? We are thus participants in a phenomenological dramaturgy in which aesthetic appraisal is inextricably linked to an estimation of risk. The existential precarity that is endemic to neoliberal global capitalism is, to all intents and purposes, entangled with the art experience generated by the interaction with Loderer’s sand sculptures. While they cannot be literally reduced to one another, the performance of risk management vis-à-vis the sand sculptures in the exhibition space is a singular iteration of the negotiation of precarity and its attendant anxieties in everyday life. What we may potentially learn from the construction of the objects themselves and our interactions with them is that security and vulnerability go hand in hand and, at best, are momentarily arrested in a state of contingent equilibrium.

- 1 Georges Bataille, quoted in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. *Formless: A User’s Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 1997, 18.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Judith Butler. *Frames of War: When is Life Governable?* London and New York: Verso, 2009; and Judith Butler. *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York: Verso, 2004.
- 4 Isabel Lorey. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg. London and New York: Verso, 2015, 2.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid, 4.
- 7 Robert Morris. “Anti-Form,” *Artforum International*, April 1968, vol. 6, no. 8.