Born in postwar Germany in 1948, Isa Genzken studied at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts before embarking on a career that would ultimately encompass deep explorations of an extraordinary range of mediums, including sculpture, film, drawing, painting, photography, and assemblage. For some forty years now, Genzken has engaged with both the most salient aesthetic concerns of the time as well as broader questions related to our experience of the exuberant and disorienting flux that defines contemporary culture. The modern urban environment, the nature of space and time, our relationship to the architecture that surrounds us, as well as the ramifications of seminal events such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the aftermath of September 11—all are examined with virtuosity, humanity, and incisive wit in Genzken’s diverse production. Published in tandem with the artist’s first major career survey in the United States, Isa Genzken: Retrospective marks the most comprehensive chronicle to date of the work of one of the most ambitious and influential artists of the past half century.
ISA GENZKEN
Retrospective

Sabine Breitwieser, Laura Hoptman, Michael Darling, and Jeffrey Grove
with an essay by Lisa Lee

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
in collaboration with
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago
Dallas Museum of Art
Céline has established a forward-thinking, rigorous design philosophy for strong, independent, modern women. Our collections freely express the ideas, emotions, and aesthetic influences that inform an evolving design vision. We embrace intellectual curiosity, honesty, and risk, and value thoughtful and provocative artistic expression.

It is an honor for us to support the work of Isa Genzken during this landmark retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. We have a great appreciation for the artist’s uncompromising integrity, complexity and independence of thought, and respect for her fearless exploration of ideas, materials, and aesthetics.
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Lisa Genzken is one of the most important and influential artists of the past thirty years, yet she has never had a major retrospective exhibition in an American art museum. This lacuna in the exhibition history of the United States has created the opportunity for The Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and the Dallas Museum of Art to combine resources to produce Isa Genzken: Retrospective, a comprehensive look at Genzken’s work in all mediums, from her early innovative experiments through her extraordinary recent installations. A majority of the works in this exhibition will be on view in the United States for the first time; others have never been exhibited institutionally anywhere.

Genzken’s work is epically diverse, but it has been inspired by two grand themes: modernity and urban architecture. It has also unfolded in chapters, beginning in the late 1970s and continuing without cease until today, when a new generation of artists, curators, and art lovers has been inspired by the artist’s radical inventiveness. Ranging from large-scale sculptures that limn Constructivist and Minimalist aesthetics to rougher, more overtly abstracted found-object and collage installations that have redefined assemblage for a new era, Genzken’s work has fearlessly taken on issues particular to our visual culture to the climate of fear created in the aftermath of September 11. Genzken was in Manhattan that day, and it is the sense of deep unease caused by that tragic scenario with its horrific conflation of architecture and spectacular destruction that weaves in and out of most of her work of the past decade. Beginning with the sculptural series Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death and culminating in the 2008 installation Ground Zero, these recent works tell the story of urban apocalypse and renewal with an incisive and critical—but also empathetic—eye.

Genzken is an artist not only of our time but also of our place. The urban environment has been a constant inspiration, but it is the modern American city that has proven to be her most ardent muse, from the skyscrapers of Chicago to the storefronts of Manhattan. If her work is less well-known to American audiences, this exhibition, which highlights the artist’s achievements in all their mastery and variety, their contemporaneity and their drama, seeks to change that.

We are grateful to the curators of the show—Sabine Breitwieser, Michael Darling, Jeffrey Grove, and Laura Hopfman—for embarking on a three-year collaboration that has produced an exhibition and a book of a quality befitting the artist’s achievements in all their mastery and variety, their contemporaneity and their drama, seeks to change that.

Finally, we extend our deep gratitude to Isa Genzken herself, for allowing our museums to share her life’s work with an audience who is sure to be astonished by it.

Maxwell L. Anderson
Eugene McDermott Director
Dallas Museum of Art

Madeleine Grynsztejn
Pritzker Director
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

Glenn D. Lowry
Director
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Isa Genzken in her studio in Düsseldorf, 1982
The new temples are already cracked future rains, one day grass will also grow over the city over its final layer.

—Einstürzende Neubauten, "Die Befindlichkeit des Landes" ("The State of the Country")

One of the most important artists of our time, Isa Genzken has developed an unconventional body of work in the postwar German context that has functioned in critical dialogue with both European and American art. Specifically in her early work, she responded to Russian and Soviet Constructivism and American Abstract Expressionism, and sought to develop a European answer to Minimalism that had international relevance. Genzken’s oeuvre is distinguished by a constant inventiveness, a highly idiosyncratic artistic approach, and an unmistakable idiom within each of her diverse groups of work. Although she has veered off in new, unexpected directions at regular intervals, reviewing her work over the course of four decades reveals a surprising coherence, one rooted in the logic of her successive artistic choices as well as in the way in which her series, in all their remarkable heterogeneity, relate to one another. Individual works, or groups of work, appear as protagonists in an open-ended play, one in which personal, autobiographical, and fictional elements enter into a dialectic with techno-scientific principles and structural concerns in ways previously considered incompatible.

This essay proposes to survey roughly the first twenty-five years of Isa Genzken’s career in its seemingly contradictory swings between the personal and the structural, beginning with its autobiographical implications and arguing from the focus on the body. Genzken’s rejection of medium-specificity, especially in regard to her broad conception of film, her equally extended notion of portraiture, and the significance of architecture as a consistent underlying concern are all key in this account of her work. Looking first at Genzken’s performance and other early works, this immediately becomes evident as we encounter film articulated through drawings, texts, and sculptural ensembles. Moreover, in Genzken’s early stereometric sculptures, the body of the viewer comes into play; Genzken mobilizes the gaze of the viewer, who needs to occupy and actively experience the sculptures in terms of the surrounding space. In all of this, Genzken does not exclude her own body; indeed, she has explored the genre of self-portraiture in a variety of unexpected forms, ranging from imprints of her studio floor to ingenious photographic techniques to representational surrogates in the form of physical objects. A reliance on objects drawn from the vocabulary of everyday life proves to be a central theme, one that she has continued to explore to the present day. Uniting all is a dynamic, expansive vision of the spatiotemporal properties of film—incorporating drawing, photography, and sculpture—as well as film’s potential as an effective and all-inclusive public medium.

I. Formation as an Artist in Postwar Germany

In Skizzen für einen Spielfilm (Sketches for a Feature Film), which first appeared in the catalogue for her 1993 exhibition at Kunsthalle Bremen (fig. 1), Genzken published twenty stories from her life that are at once mundane and unsettling, beginning with her birth and ending with an exhibition opening.1 From the start, her autobiography is clearly embellished with fictional elements and touches of parody, for her description of life in the late 1940s in her birthplace of Bad Oldesloe in northern Germany unmistakably borrows from the atmosphere of Carl Spitzweg’s painting Der arme Poet (The Poor Poet) (1839). Recalling Spitzweg’s depiction of an artist’s impoverished life and working conditions, Genzken draws an image of herself as a baby swaddled in a laundry basket with an umbrella attached to protect her from the rain dripping through the attic roof. While the artist was still a small child, her parents moved to Hamburg, thirty miles away, into a middle-class apartment house on Sophienterrasse next to the Aussenalster. At that imposing address,
where "everyone was rich except for us," the family occupied a one-room apartment with a single floor-to-ceiling window facing the garden out back. The Germany of Genzken's childhood in the 1950s was still reeling in the aftermath of the war, and her parents seem to have tried to compensate for such confined living conditions with creativity. Near the front door, her mother marked off a children's room with a construction of cords.

Genzken has recalled her early personal and artistic development in the three works Family, Sophienterrasse, and Mittelweg (all 1991). These sculptures, reminiscent of window frames, are comprised of poured concrete and epoxy elements of different sizes, hinged together in pairs, representing the first architectural forms that impressed her. Two similar sculptures from this period, simply titled Paravent (Screens), have no personal references and only an indication of a possible function. In this group of works, Genzken presents hybrid objects that oscillate between autonomous sculptures and flexible interior architecture. With them, she seeks to objectify her formative years: her earliest social unit (Family; fig. 2), the first address she knew (Sophienterrasse), and her first route to school (Mittelweg). The oscillation of these forms between autonomy and usefulness reflects at once Genzken's particular formal concerns while simultaneously addressing the narrowness of our vision, questioning the meaning of the past and the accuracy of recollection. While two of the sculptures are cast wholly in concrete, the third and largest one is unique for the manner in which its material alone seems to exemplify the unfolding problematicalities of memory and history in postwar Germany. In the largest element of the three-part sculpture Family, only a portion of one of the wings is concrete, whereas the two smaller windows are cast wholly in epoxy. The transparent epoxy, extremely toxic in the casting and hardening stages, looks like it is coated in certain areas by a more massive layer of concrete, as though with a second skin. No other material evokes German reconstruction after 1945 like concrete. Indeed, one could draw the conclusion that here, mummified with epoxy, it represents an archaeology, often experienced as unpleasant, of collective and individual responsibility for the horrific events of the 1930s and 1940s.

As Germany sought to rebuild after the war and began to grapple with the enormity of its crimes against humanity, it embarked on a building program of "ethical architecture," yet at the same time the postwar devastation was also seen as an opportunity to implement urban planning measures that seamlessly meshed with those already conceived by the...
Plate 1. Untitled, 1974
Lacquered wood, two parts
Part one: 58 ¼ × 1⅞ × ⅝" (147.5 × 4.5 × 1 cm)
Part two: 80 ⅞ × ⅞ × ⅞" (205 × 2 × 2 cm)
Thomas Borgmann, Berlin
Plate 2. Gelbes Ellipsoid (Yellow Ellipsoid), 1976
Lacquered wood
3 ⁹/¹⁶ × 3 ⁹/¹⁶ × 191 ⁵/¹⁶" (9 × 9 × 486 cm)
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin

Plate 3. Schwarzes Hyperbolo 'Nüsschen' (Black Hyperbolo 'Little Nuts'), 1980
Lacquered wood
5 ¹¹/¹⁶ × 9 ¹³/¹⁶ × 219 ⅞" (14.5 × 25 × 558.5 cm)
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin


Digital print on high-performance foil
228 x 163.5 cm (90 x 64 ⁷/₁₆)
Installation view at City Hall, Innsbruck, Austria.
Plate 21: Mein Gehirn (My Brain), 1984
Synthetic polymer paint on plaster, metal
$4\frac{1}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{16}$ in ($12 \times 20 \times 18$ cm)
Collection Daniel Buchholz
and Christopher Müller, Cologne

Plate 22: Müllberg (Pile of Rubbish), 1984
Plaster, metal, burlap, and paper
$4\frac{1}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{8} \times 18\frac{1}{2}$ in ($12 \times 20 \times 47$ cm)
Private collection, Turin

Plate 23: Birne (Pear), 1984
Synthetic polymer paint on plaster; lightbulb
$11\frac{13}{16} \times 7\frac{7}{16} \times 8\frac{11}{16}$ in ($30 \times 20 \times 22$ cm)
Generali Foundation Collection, Vienna
Plate 28. Weltempfänger (World Receiver), 1987–89
Concrete, steel, and metal radio antennas
Overall: 64 ¼ × 82 ¼ × 15 ¾“ (163 × 210 × 40 cm)
Private collection
Facing
Plate 30. Rosa Zimmer (Pink Room), 1987
Spray paint on concrete, slate
76 ⅜ × 18 ⅛ × 22 ⁷ /¹⁶” (194 × 46 × 57 cm)
Generali Foundation Collection, Vienna

Above
Plate 31. Kleiner Pavilion (Small Pavilion), 1989
Concrete, tiles, and steel
70 × 16 × 18” (177.8 × 40.6 × 45.7 cm)
Courtesy David Zwirner, New York
Introduction: Realism, Narrative, Urban Life

Most writers on Isa Genzken’s work have concentrated on the thematic continuities in an oeuvre that, over forty years, is notable for its formal variety. To acknowledge the connections between visually disparate sculptures like her series of Hyperbolos, begun in 1976, and more recent sculptural ensembles such as Ground Zero, done thirty years later, does not mask the fact that at the beginning of the 1990s, concurrent with a number of significant shifts in the artist’s life—including a final separation from her husband, Gerhard Richter, her introduction to a younger group of artists and gallerists, and a move from Cologne to Berlin—Genzken radically changed her artistic strategy, moving away from the constructed object towards the assembled one. Genzken’s full-blown collage aesthetic as expressed in three dimensions would not make an appearance until around 1999, but in the several years preceding, her researches and experiences built towards what has become a twenty-year investigation into assemblage. With this found-object-based language, Genzken has expanded and explored a complex and very contemporary notion of realism that, in fact, began its formation early on in her career.

The advent of assemblage in Genzken’s practice coincided with a heightened interest in her work internationally, specifically by a generation of artists, gallerists, and curators significantly younger than she who presented her work in the context of a cultural renaissance in post-unification Germany, centered in Berlin. The artist’s move from Cologne to Berlin in 1996 seemed to serve as a definitive break from the intellectual context of an earlier generation of German art that had previously informed much of her work, particularly the work of Richter and the legacies of American Minimalism and Conceptualism. Genzken remarked that the change in her work in the 1990s was the result of finally becoming herself. “I’m no longer interested in the art of others,” she said to Nicolaus Schafhausen in an interview in 2007, “I simply want to do my own thing.” And do her own thing she did. Genzken retained her keen
Genzken had long experimented with the dynamics of an artwork’s relation to the viewer, but her shift to assemblage marked a radical leap. In contrast to works ranging from her Hyperbolos and Ellipsoids to her concrete constructions, assemblage posits an entirely different mode of looking at an artwork in relationship to the world that surrounds it. A number of critics have analyzed Genzken’s production in the 1970s and 1980s in reference to the notion of “social space,” citing the elements in all of Genzken’s three-dimensional works that cause them to interact with the viewer and the space that surrounds them.1 By the early 1990s Genzken’s desire for her work to interact with the world around it had grown to the point where mere site-specificity or the manipulation of formal spatial relationships between the object and the viewer did not suffice. In 1987 Genzken was quoted as saying that “public sculpture operates between the two poles of a new housing development and a traditional monument,” which is to say, from a domicile to a public object, from the secrets of the interior to the visibility of the popular.2 In the 1990s Genzken moved from the creation of an object in an environment to the creation of environments themselves. In an effort not to represent the world but to be part of it—in other words, to be modern—Genzken chose as her raw materials the cheap, shiny, and ubiquitous building blocks of the contemporary urban environment: from toys to cardboard pizza boxes, from Mylar and caution tape to orange construction netting. Working with these real-world materials, she created installations that engaged with the everyday in substance as well as in subject.

Genzken’s respect for the object in the world was made apparent very early in her career, when in 1979 she lushly rephotographed advertisements for high-end stereo equipment and then framed them (pls. 11–15). Looking back on her motivation for this series, Genzken saw in these superbly engineered objects that she photographed so lovingly a model for contemporary sculpture. “When I was photographing hi-fi adverts I thought to myself, everyone has one of these towers at home. It’s the readymade, a strategy which, in its purest form, she explored only once, with Weltempfänger (World Receiver) (pl. 20), a work consisting of a state-of-the-art world-band radio receiver placed at eye level on a high, slim base. In an object like Weltempfänger and, subsequently, in her full-blown assemblages, Genzken was less interested in matters of recontextualization (the transformation of a manufactured quotidian object into an art object through context) than the orchestration of already-made elements of daily life into a larger narrative. Brilliantly engineered and executed things in the world like the Weltempfänger, a pane of precut colored glass, or a cast-plastic toy were not, in and of themselves, interesting as sculpture, but Genzken realized, perhaps through her analysis of the role of the photographic image, that they could carry the weight of representation and of narrative in her sculpture. “I have always said that, with any sculpture you have to be able to say that, with any sculpture you have to be able to say—although this is not a readymade, it could be one,” Genzken stated in an interview with the photographer Wolfgang Tillmans in 2003. “That’s what a sculpture has to look like. It must have a certain relation to reality.”3

Genzken met Tillmans in 1993 at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Cologne. Buchholz, who opened his gallery in 1986, began to represent Genzken two years later. He was fifteen years younger than Genzken, and his stable of artists mainly reflected a new generation emerging from Cologne in the 1990s, including Tillmans (who was based in London but traveled often to Cologne) and, by 1995, the musician, painter, sculptor, performer, and Cologne denizen Kai Althoff. Tillmans and Althoff became Genzken’s close friends and sometime collaborators. Tillmans’s and Genzken’s respective work of the past fifteen years have an interesting reciprocal relationship, and Genzken’s ideas concerning the photograph as an object akin to a sculpture seem to be relevant as well for the younger artist’s installation work. In her interview with Tillmans, Genzken made an explicit connection between photography and sculpture: “Often my feeling is that [artists] think something up that is supposed to be art. That’s not what I want at all. Rather, a sculpture is really a photo—although it can be shifted, it just still always has an aspect that reality has, too.”4

This conflation of the sculptural and the photographic on the basis of a shared realism forms one of the pillars of Genzken’s assemblage aesthetic. The link between the two seemingly diverse mediums was made, in Genzken’s formation, through the idea that a photograph itself is
Plate 65. I Love New York, Crazy City, 1995–96 (detail views)
Paper, gelatin silver and chromogenic color prints, and tape, in three books
Each: 15 ⅜ × 12 ⅝ × 2 ¾” (39 × 32 × 7 cm)
Collection: the artist
Plate 72. Installation view of portrait columns in Isa Genzken: Sie und mein Glück, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany, June 11–August 27, 2000
Plate 76. *Fuck the Bauhaus #2*, 2000
Plywood, plastic, paper, cardboard pizza box, plastic flowers, stones, tape, model trees, and toy car
82 ¹/₁₆ × 27 ⁴/₁₆ × 20 ¹/₁₆" (210 × 70 × 51 cm)
Collection Charles Asprey

Plate 77. *Fuck the Bauhaus #4*, 2000
Plywood, plexiglass, plastic film, clipboards, aluminum light shade, flower petals, tape, printed paper, shells, and model tree
88 ¹/₁₆ × 30 ⁵/₁₆ × 24" (224 × 77 × 61 cm)
Private collection, Turin
Plate 91. *Empire/Vampire IV*, 2004
Spray paint on metal and glass, chromogenic color prints, and plastic on wood pedestal
65 ½ × 23 ⅞ × 18 ¼" (167 × 60 × 46 cm)
Collection neugerriemschneider, Berlin

Plate 92. *Empire/Vampire X*, 2003
Synthetic polymer paint on Styrofoam, plastic, artificial flowers, and fabric on wood pedestal
86 ¼ × 23 ⅞ × 17 ¹¹ /¹⁶" (219 × 60 × 45 cm)
Plate 104. Kinder Filmen III, VI, VIII, XI, and XII (Children Filming III, VI, VIII, XI, and XII), 2005
Spray paint on umbrellas and stands, wood crates, plastic chairs, dolls, ceramic figurines, plastic safety nets, molded-plastic bubble mirror, casters, utility cart with wheels, mirrors, books, pans, plastic hanging board rack, rubber gloves, printed paper, paper bag, toy gun, fabric hats and vests, tape, electric fan, and electrical components
Dimensions variable
Museum Ludwig, Cologne
Plate 106. Oil XI, 2007
Vinyl, plastic, and aluminum suitcases; silkscreen on laminated fabric; jackets; stuffed animals; plastic; paper; frames; and three fabric and plastic space suits, twenty parts
Dimensions variable
Installation view at the German Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale, Venice, June 10–November 21, 2007
Facing Plate 115. Memorial Tower (Ground Zero), 2008
Synthetic polymer paint and spray paint on mirror foil and tape, plastic, filmstrips, printed paper, fiberboard, and casters
124 ¾ × 35 ⅞ × 35 ⅞” (316 × 86 × 90 cm)
Collection Eric and Suzanne Syz, Switzerland

Above Plate 113, 114. Hospital (Ground Zero), 2008
Synthetic polymer paint on fabric, metal dolly, plastic flowers in spray-painted vase, ribbon, metal, mirror foil, glass, fiberboard, and casters
122 ¹³ /¹⁶ × 24 ¹³ /¹⁶ × 29 ¹⁵ /¹⁶” (312 × 63 × 76 cm)
Collection Charles Asprey
Plates 128, 129  |  Schauspieler (Actors), 2013 (detail views)
Mannequins, clothes, shoes, fabric, and paper
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin
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