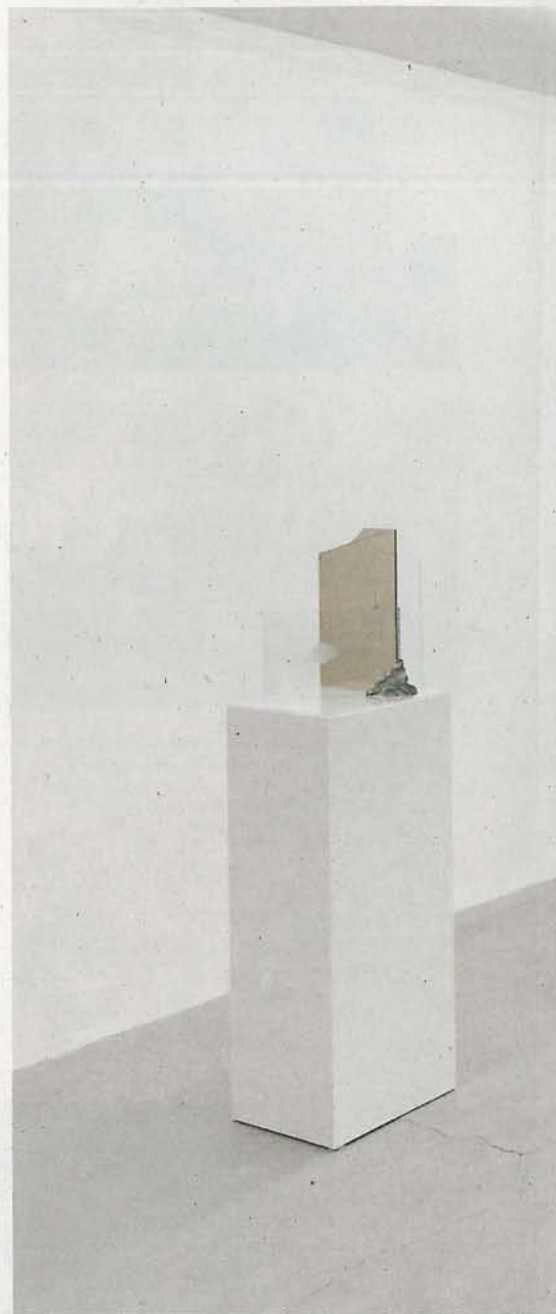


THE CONSEQUENCES OF MATERIAL

From Left:

Fountain Enviro scape, 2009
Courtesy: Galerie Circus, Berlin
Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul

"Fountain"
exhibition view, Galerie Circus, Berlin, 2009
Courtesy: Galerie Circus, Berlin
Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul



Exploring the semantic roots and the ideology of materials, the work of Norwegian artist MARTE EKNÆS brings to the surface the manipulation encoded in public architecture, revealing the importance of a key word shared with cult architect Robert Venturi.

words by MELISSA GRONLUND

London's City Hall was designed by Norman Foster as an oval, lumpy building made up of different floors sitting awkwardly atop each other, like an egg-shaped cheesecake cut into slices and stacked up again. A bravura winding staircase travels the vertical length of the building, allowing people walking up or down the stairs to peer into the offices on each floor, separated from the staircase by glass windows. The staircase itself floats directly above the office where the mayor sits and where high-level meetings are held. Though the staircase was meant—like the glass dome of Foster's design for the Berlin Reichstag building—as a sign (and a means) of transparency, after a few weeks the amount of noise traveling down the staircase grew to be too great of a disturbance for the mayor, and staff were asked not to use the staircase when a meeting was in progress.

The malleability of the term "transparency"—from its functioning as a governmental and financial buzzword to its use as a literal building term—allows these little ironies to shine through, with perhaps more worth than they merit. Keeping staff off the



staircase is no less an indicator of a government's corruption, inefficiency or incompetence as clear windows are of its sparkling intelligence. Nevertheless, government and corporation buildings have taken the idea of "transparency" as both a literal and symbolic constituent: actively equating the social imperative for "transparency" with the use of transparent building materials, they employ their buildings' glass skins as advertisements for a putative ethos within.

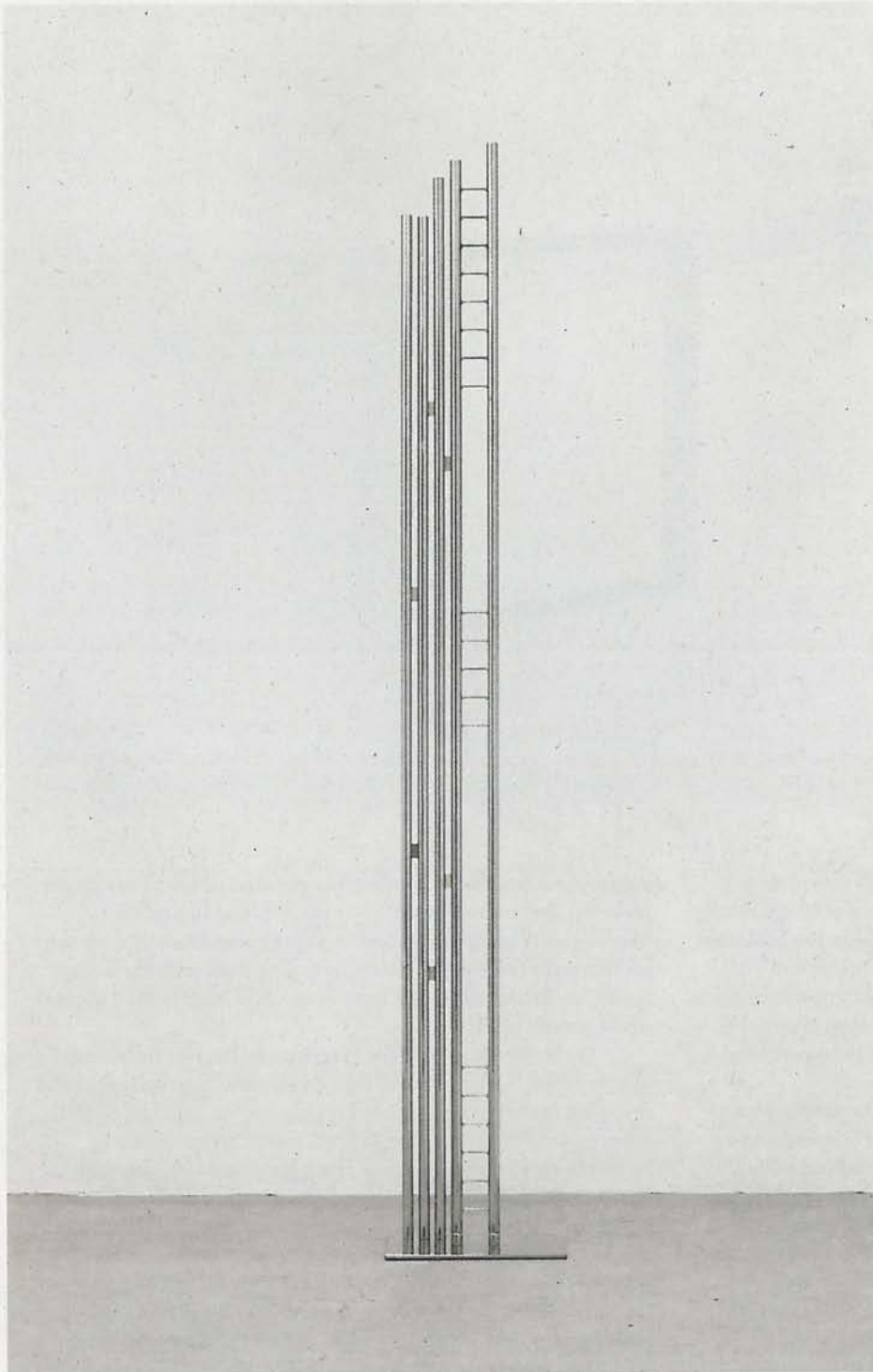
This inherence of ideology in materials is the problem taken up by Marte Eknæs, whose work investigates how corporate and commercial architecture work to manipulate the subject within the public sphere. Her sculptures and works on paper draw their materials from the commercial sector they critique, often using found or appropriated elements—cheap metal clothes rods from retail shops, plastic shading for car windows, adhesive "brick" film—to modify their mode of operation, trading their function (such as, for example, the use of a plastic windshield to soften the light through a car window) for participation in formalist,

autonomous sculpture. Though this question of autonomy might seem too obvious to mention, it is nevertheless important to emphasize. What appears most thrilling about Eknæs's work is its sudden tacks sideways to purely formal or classically rhetorical inquiries—irony, tautology, ornament—that leave behind the real-world genesis of the works.

For her work in 2009 for Momentum, the Nordic biennial held in Moss, Norway, Eknæs investigated the use of glass in local shopping malls to demonstrate how it gives the false impression of being outside—in an unregulated, public space—while in fact working to direct shoppers along long vistas mediated by commercial interests: corridors of coffee bars, clothing companies and homeware purveyors selling a version of the good life, one in which certain values are ratified. Personal contentment, love of family life—these are the feelings given by advertising and commercial interests that dress the architecture of so-called public spaces, like Potsdamer Platz in Berlin or Times Square in New York, with their promotion of relationships, technological



Fountain I, 2009
Courtesy: Galerie Circus, Berlin
Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul



ARTIST'S BIO
MARTE EKNÆS (b. 1978) is a Norwegian artist, currently living and working between London and Berlin. She studied at the Glasgow School of Art, at the California Institute of the Arts (Valencia, California) and the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (London). She recently had a solo exhibition at Circus (Berlin) and exhibited at Momentum, the 5th Nordic Biennial of Contemporary Art (Moss).

Elaboration, 2009
Courtesy: Galerie Circus, Berlin
Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul

progress and ostensibly independent lifestyles. The resulting work for Momentum, *Milieu* (2009), was made of two pieces of glass, one about three times the length of the other, slid into a bent metal hinge to create a long shape not unlike the arcades of shopping malls. The longer glass was etched with circular holes that referred to the sticker dots put on glass doors in public buildings so that people will not walk into them, while the smaller glass was covered in plastic sheeting depicting fake water drops, a material often used to decorate bathroom interiors with funny faux perma-hydration.

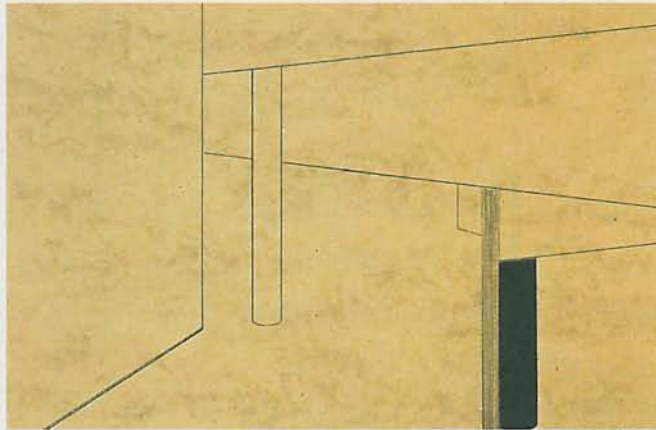
Like her use of the sheet of plastic raindrops, Eknæs often plays with “literal” materials, which she orders from commercial and industrial suppliers. Her use of these materials acknowledges their aspirational quality (wood-like siding for people who can’t afford wood, for example) and, moreover, exemplifies their status as semantic dead-ends. Unlike the transparency of corporate glass architecture, which seeks to convey the corporation’s honesty and efficiency, this material seeks to communicate not symbolism or coding but simply what it wishes to be: “Watch this ‘wood’ attempt

hold for the North American version), are created only in the space of the relationships between the players. It is possible to read Venturi as also angling—however ironically—for the suspension of information that Eknæs attempts to achieve in her work and thereby counter in the built environment.

It would be interesting to connect Eknæs’s interest in tautology with Venturi and Scott Brown’s (for instance, their famous example of the café on Long Island, New York, which is shaped like a duck, that is, like the poultry sold inside), and to juxtapose, with an eye to drawing out similarities, Venturi and Scott Brown’s avowed populism with Eknæs’s use of a formalist, autonomous art language. *Elaboration* (2009), made of the metal racks that hold clothes in chain stores—held together by magnets that any spectator could remove—is reminiscent of Dan Flavin’s “Monument” for V. Tatlin I (1964). Standing upright, tall and thin in the exhibition space, it seems to want not only Flavin’s neon lights, but also Aaron Copland’s overtures of enthusiasm and optimism, associated with that same America that pushes for the privatization of public space.

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

From April 13 to June 13, Marte Eknæs will have a solo exhibition at the Bonner Kunstverein (Bonn).



AUTHOR

MELISSA GRONLUND is a writer based in London and the Managing Editor of *Afterall* journal. She is a visiting tutor in art history at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford University, and assists with the programming for the *Experimenta* section of the London Film Festival.

to look like wood.” Eknæs suggests that such commercial tautologies could be read as genetic aberrations. Rather than pushing us towards consumption, they simply reiterate what we have consumed; they are pure ornament, useless in any semantic sense.

With this in mind, compare Eknæs’s attitude toward information with the enthusiasm with which the high priests of popular culture and postmodernism, architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, greeted the LED screen. Venturi and Scott Brown read electronic “skins” on buildings as authentic to and even the key innovation of our age. One of Venturi’s proposals was the “Bill Ding-Board,” which Paul Goldberger described in a 2001 *New Yorker* article as:

“a shedlike exhibition structure set behind an immense electronic signboard that was to rise to twice the building’s height. The signboard would continuously project images of classic football plays, while the interior would contain a display of football relics and more projections of film on the barrel-vaulted ceiling. Venturi maintained that this was an electronic version of the painted ceilings of Baroque churches. Today, we talk about how cyberspace is changing the nature of built space, but this project, designed thirty-four years ago, is the first instance I know of in which an architect said, in effect, that the information is the building.”

Despite this keyword “information,” there is something in Venturi’s choice of displayed material that suggests a shared interest in pure formalism: sports are essentially the art of coordinating actions solely through rules. Football games, which Diederich Diederichsen once compared to the act of interpretation (he was talking about European football—who knows if his analogy would

Perhaps a moment of emancipation lies not in the “stuff” espoused by postmodernism, but within the organization of said “stuff,” becoming a face upon which codes give way to formalism.

Indeed, Eknæs’s most recent show “Fountain” at Berlin-based gallery Circus, examined a component of public space—the fountain—for its ability to evoke joy. Though fountains have lost their function of supplying passersby and their animals with water to drink, the set of associations they maintain arguably relates back to the relief or reprieve that public access to water once supplied—a connotation apparent in pop culture, from the cast of *Friends* splashing in the water of a fountain to the enduring fascination with Anita Ekberg in the Trevi fountain in *La Dolce Vita*. Eknæs’s *Fountain Enviroscapes* (2009) consists of sheets of Plexiglas and etched glass that mimic cascading water, held together with adhesive film cut-outs of fake pebbles. While using the same types of material as in her previous work (indeed, she arranged it in the show in dialogue with older bodies of work), the sculpture is less focused on how public space evokes or encodes feelings than with how these feelings act on subjects: why is it that fountains are particularly joyful? Rendering these fountains in her own specific mode of representation, Eknæs foregrounds not only “subjectivity” in the abstract but also her own subjectivity, testing out a reading of public space from a viewpoint that questions the efficacy of prescriptive experience.

Levels II, 2009
Courtesy: Galerie Circus, Berlin
Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul