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Wire and String: Olga Balema's Sinewy Abjection

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Olga Balema, "brain damage" installation view, 2019. Image copyright Olga Balema, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC.

What does it mean when the most meaningful thing is damn near nothing at all? Not the antiseptic nothing of Marie Kondo's puritan minimalism, but rather a faint, cthonic sounding. Some locations throw this kind of near-nothingness into particular contrast. In this case the location is New York; a city that bombards you; a city where economic and racial brutality sunders bodies and hearts; a city where energy and depression concatenate; a city whose insides contain insides contain insides, right down to your very own.

To enter Olga Balema's *brain damage*, in Bridget Donahue's downtown gallery, you step through a doorway on the clanging and crashing Bowery, then clamber up a flight of stairs. A network of elastics – the sort that keep sock cuffs tight – stretch at low heights

and sloping angles, across a broad wooden-planked floor. Pinioned with nails, and often paint-encrusted, they look like guts or tendons being dried for ritual use; or maybe it's a trap, like some bastard cat's cradle. In a sense Balema's show seemed too cool, too obvious in its punk nonchalance. You could say that time will cast the final verdict on this – that passing months and years will give us perspective on whether the work was as immanent as it felt, or whether its power was simply a result of the contrast between a fleeting gesture and the gigantic urban calamity outside. But there's a hitch in that formula; in all likelihood, time will also do away with the work's cheap materials. That – in an impish twist – may be its lasting effect, as a reverberation of our own decomposing and disappearing selves.

To view this close-to-the-bone reality of Balema's show in contrast to our burning world – from ecological calamity to ascendant fascism – is to be pinched in a double bind. We need art that buttonholes the propagators of cruelty: despots, oligarchs, murderous policemen … But we also know that art can't do only that. We know that it needs to do other things: re-draw attention around our grossly pulsing veins, our firing and misfiring neurons, our sinewy links and sticky leaks.

Olga Balema, "brain damage" installation view, 2019. Image copyright Olga Balema, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC.

Between 2014, it was Balema's attention to this bodily realm that positioned her in conversation with a group of prominent young artists who had set about reviving abjection in art. In March 2016 alone, *Frieze* magazine addressed this carnal return no fewer than three times. Through such writing, it became clear that this renewed attention to abjection in contemporary art was merely the latest in a sporadic tradition of giving

voice to the body's hidden regions, and the grossest gutters of urbanity. The writer Kirsty Bell traced the genealogy of these millennial artists' work to the Industrial Revolution, and the archetype of the ragpicker – a figure who became emblematic of Walter Benjamin's "profane illumination," the discovery of magical or surprising properties in the discarded or maligned. Like Balema and her viewers, the ragpicker stooped in order to work.

Many years later, artists like Robert Rauschenberg and myriad "Outsider" art assemblagists – often artists of color, ignored by official art history – incorporated the neglected objects of life into seemingly chaotic sculptures that possessed subtle rhythms of accumulation and omission. Eventually, artists like Eva Hesse invented an embodied and – preceding Balema – decay-prone resin and rubber minimalism. And, once the intellectual seriousness of Minimalism and conceptual art had gone stale, and after the 1980s' over-rich and over-sized paintings began to sour, the ragpicker made a series of ghostly comebacks. Artists like Isa Genzken and Rachel Harrison clumped bric-a-brac into scrapbook collages and sculptures that coruscated and belched with bodies, signifiers, and stories.

The abject work that picked up this trail in the twenty-first century conjured an entropic world inseparable from human beings. It was a vision contrary to late capitalist alienation, that magical detachment from biology, nature, industry, as well as our own unseemly bodies. Those anxious, ugly aspects of us were refusing a world governed by sleek technological services and pious repression. For the writer Wayne Koestenbaum, writing in his 2011 book *Humiliation*:

Even a mouth gaping open and bleeding, in a periodontal close-up, isn't as repellant as the [television] program's coach, yelling at a disobedient contestant who reneged on her diet by gorging on cream cheese and a pack of hot dogs …

Balema emblematized a sympathetic return to our biological-industrial selves. Memorably, she filled thick plastic pouches with water and rusting knick-knacks. The works became over-determined dream cyphers: slumped pillows, engorged bladders, colostomy bags, jaundiced spleens. In other works, haphazard and tumescent forms drooped from large maps, slathered with paint. Mostly these shapes looked like breasts, or sometimes more ambiguous appendages. Either way, they were organisms whose public appearance had been forbidden. Balema produced an upending dissonance by presenting these things on host bodies, maps that embodied rationality, control, and order.

Olga Balema, "brain damage" installation view, 2019. Image copyright Olga Balema, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC.

Shame is repression's emotional consort. Hanging my head like a scolded altar boy, I looked at Balema's elastics and texted someone back home: "This is show is irritatingly good." The response I received – "she's a very good brat" – was deference guised as condescension. The show's success had to be admitted. But the admission had to be hedged with ironic reverence for conservative ideas about the relationship between hard work and good art. There's a measure of shame in shirking that standard – or, in enjoying an artist having done so.

Balema's show evoked this ambivalence; but also another. Its title – brain damage – amplified an allusion to a diminished, shadow self. At the same time, it cast the artist as a kind of modern-day alchemist, capable of conjuring consciousness itself with only a few crusty elastics. Balema has good models for this sly conjuring. In 1984, the year Balema was born, Genzken made a sculpture called *Mien Gehirn (My Brain)*, a club of paint-drizzled plaster, out of which protruded a limp copper wire.

There's something in these inventive but unpolished gestures that gets at the heart of this show's effect; a kind of inverse rock-and-roll attitude, wherein the esteeming of all things gross and hidden is coupled with a disregard for elaborate armatures of technique, illusion, and transformation. These materials – and Olga's usage of them – are free from all of that; they do their own thing. Which is probably why, when thinking about Balema's show, I began listening on repeat to Funkadelic's searing guitar solo, "Maggot Brain." Despite obvious differences, Balema's show and Funkadelic's psychedelic soul share structural and emotive affinities. Both exemplify a virtuosity in reduced but stirring

technique; in each case, augmented string performs a coarse bliss. Solo acts don't read very well these days – a time when we need collectivism more than ever. But this kind of unearthly affect might be worth the odd exception.

Here, I'm showing my cards and outing my needs. I want art to provide more of the resonance that music offers. And I want that resonance simultaneously with the eldritch signification that Balema here provides. With a creepiness well-fitting our screen-enslaved lives, these choleric elastics echoed the cords and strings that live inside our bodies, but also those wires that animate the technological prostheses with which we're fused. None of these things are given idealized depiction. There are no glossy surfaces – no smoothly firing synapses or hyperlinks. Everything is worn and stretched, jerry-rigged and encrusted with wear and time.

This line of interpretation positions Balema's show in another recent sculptural preoccupation – the post-human. As such, it also becomes a throwback to the 1980s heyday of cyborg theory and fiction. I like thinking of Balema's show in this sense, but not for too long. That clear-headed cerebral read struggles and sparks with the work's depressive but somehow ecstatic musicality. The binding of these poles is what makes this work tick. It circuits through flesh and grey matter like electricity by some other name.[i]

[i] https://momus.ca/wire-and-string-olga-balemas-sinewy-abjection/