

BOMB

Armchair Ideology: Henrike Naumann Interviewed by Tobias Rosen and Luise Mörke

Installations as stage sets for the confluence of design and ideology. Feb 1, 2023

SculptureCenter



Detail of Henrike Naumann, *Horseshoe Theory*, 2022. *Henrike Naumann: Re-Education*, SculptureCenter, New York City. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist.

Henri Matisse reportedly wanted art to be as cozy as an armchair, a respite from life's agonies and turmoil. In [Re-Education](#), Henrike Naumann's first US exhibition, armchairs take center stage—not, however, as safe havens, but as thrones of ideology. Naumann is known for creating installations from mass-produced furniture and objects; their quirky forms are intended to resound with political rumination. Much of her work deals with the increase of far-right radicalization before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, concurrent with East Germany's integration into the capitalist market. Spending time in these environments leaves one forever suspicious of the unassuming shelves, swerving couches, and bizarre tchotchkes encountered within ostensibly private realms. Her current show at New York City's SculptureCenter brings this sensibility to US design and politics, which she conceives of as a critique of the dubious horseshoe theory. This concept, developed in the 1930s in Germany, suggests that political extremes bend toward each other in the shape of a horseshoe.

—Tobias Rosen and Luise Mörke

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The national anthem of the German Democratic Republic begins with the line “*Auferstanden aus Ruinen*” [Resurrected from ruins]. We know that ruins have played a large role in some of your previous work, like the 2019 exhibition *Ruinenwert* at Haus der Kunst in Munich. How do you see the relation between the state and the ruins that it emerged from?

Henrike Naumann

In my work, I am transferring theories on architecture onto domestic interiors through artistic practice. Furniture pieces that nobody wants anymore are ruins to me that I excavate in the exhibition space and make accessible for an audience. Last July, we evacuated my installation *2000* from Kyiv and made it accessible at Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. I wanted people to be able to sit on these German furniture pieces that had just come back from Ukraine communicating the reality and brutality of the war, but also to speak about the normalizing effect of violence and the entanglement of Germany in this conflict.



Installation view of *Henrike Naumann: Re-Education*, 2022. SculptureCenter, New York City. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist.

TB & LM

German politics, culture, and history have often been the focus of your work, and most of your previous exhibitions were in Germany. What are the challenges of exhibiting in the US, and how does the location impact your practice?

HN

In the last years, I expanded my practice specifically to countries of the former Eastern Bloc, in post-Soviet and post-Yugoslavian countries. With this focus toward the larger context East—while at the same time realizing that my own perspective will always be East *and* West—I knew that in the US I wanted to focus on the West: how people in America were looking at everything happening behind the Iron Curtain and how we looked at the US mediated through TV shows and consumer objects.

I decided to produce the whole show on-site in New York City with no furniture or objects from Germany. So everything depended on what I found there and how my research developed. That was a bit scary at

first, not knowing what would happen. But it ensured that I would do something new and maybe even change my way of producing.

TB & LM

So did the show change your way of producing? Were there constraints or liberations to working in New York?

HN

The biggest challenge—and excitement factor—was the magnitude of New York’s material culture. Every object probably exists there somewhere; I just had to find it. That was a bit overwhelming, as my practice relies on going through “everything” and finding the leftovers of society. It resulted in having to do way more research and thinking before acquiring the first chair, the bone chair. But over time I got introduced to ways of finding things for free, for example at the spectacular Material for the Arts, and this made it possible to collect a large number of objects and then play around with them in the space.

TB & LM

You also often use eBay Kleinanzeigen, the German equivalent to Craigslist, to source the furniture for your installations. eBay can be a little bit like an archive in that results depend on search terms and on who uploaded an item. We had a funny experience when we were looking for a fold-up desk with storage space. What came up under the search term *Sekretär* was mainly expensive midcentury furniture. When we switched to *Schrankwand*, most things were given away for free, even though the function hadn’t changed. What are your strategies for navigating the social and economic codes of eBay? Which search terms are you using?

HN

It’s all about the search terms, and to be honest I usually don’t search for functional descriptions of actual furniture pieces but rather for personal descriptions and emotional judgments as well as political and theoretical words from my research. I am just curious what pops up. If the online search for physical objects is part of the conceptual research, the search terms can get quite funky. I love to look for

things that I think *cannot* exist. And then it often turns out they do exist. And then I need to get them.



Detail of Henrike Naumann, *Welcome to Bedrock*, 2022. *Henrike Naumann: Re-Education*, SculptureCenter, New York City. Benjamin Moore “Bleeker Beige” (HC-80), *The Flintstones*-style television set, *The Flintstones*-style window with monitor, rocks, contemporary Stone Age items from eBay, Craigslist, and New York’s stoops and flea markets, dimensions variable. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist.

TB & LM

It seems like you are looking out for specific forms, for example, sharp triangles, dramatic curves, and squiggly lines. Do you have a vocabulary to describe the designs that you are drawn to?

HN

It is indeed like an alphabet that I developed over the years to speak about recurring themes. I look out for these shapes but add new ones according to the topic and context. Also, I have a color palette for every new work. It’s a bit like the work of an interior designer, only that my client is imagined—a politician, a historical figure, or, like in my production in New York, a political system.

TB & LM

You have already brought up the importance of politics. In a domestic context, the objects in your work could pass as ordinary and harmless, disappearing into daily use or storage. One could say something similar about ideology. Can you describe the relationship between ideology and furniture in your work?

HN

While researching and reading texts on political topics, I go to flea markets and estate sales to find objects that transport the connections I establish and the insights I get while diving into daily news and deeper academic analysis. So my artistic practice is about interpreting politics while looking at designed objects. I like to speak about politics the same way we speak about taste, as something subjective and divisive; and I love finding extreme design objects that provoke an emotional reaction. I want people to get into discussion while sitting on weird furniture sourced from their hometown.

TB & LM

We never actually dared to sit on the furniture. Are we supposed to become participants in your politically charged arrangements?

HN

Absolutely! Because I have a background in theater, people sometimes ask me why I don't work with performers. But I realized that the stages I build serve as environments for the visitors who can inhabit them and make them come alive. So, yes, please sit on all of the furniture!

TB & LM

During our first encounter you said something striking, that understanding your work through someone from West Germany, like Joseph Beuys, would be a mistake. What is the artistic lineage you position yourself in?

HN

During the first years of my life socialist East Germany still existed, and my parents were still studying. That's why I spent a lot of time

personal belongings, and a big metal clothing rack where my clothes are sorted by color.

Henrike Naumann: Re-Education is on view at SculptureCenter in New York City until February 27.

Tobias Rosen is an art historian, working on socialist art in the German Democratic Republic. Luise Mörke is a writer and critic of contemporary art and literature. They are both based in Berlin.