

ArtSeen

Henrike Naumann: *Re-Education*

By Annabel Keenan

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In her debut US solo show, *Re-Education* at SculptureCenter, Berlin-based artist Henrike Naumann explores the power of design to disseminate specific messages and align with larger ideologies. Using mainly found furniture arranged into large installations, Naumann reframes items of consumerism as icons of political and historical significance. *Re-Education* references the twofold meaning of the term, first as a post-World War II program initiated by the Allied Forces to establish themselves in Germany, and again after the dissolution of the eastern German Democratic Republic (GDR) and reunification. Having experienced her home nation both under the former GDR and a unified Germany, Naumann's practice concerns the transformation of society after the influx of Western capitalism, including pop culture and material goods. In doing so, she asks viewers to suspend their understanding of design and enter into a re-education.

In the center of the cavernous exhibition space is a series of chairs in various styles that are arranged to form a giant horseshoe. The installation, *Horseshoe Theory* (2022), is a reference to the political concept that suggests that far left and far right extremisms closely resemble one another as opposed to being at opposite ends of a spectrum. Visually, the idea is that if extreme left and extreme right were on a line, they'd bend towards one another as if shaped like a horseshoe. Naumann's work plays upon a meme circulated on Instagram called the "Horseshoe Theory of Chair Design and Function" from the account northwest_mcm-wholesale, which pairs chair designs with political and religious beliefs, as well as terms like science accurate, third wave feminism, and male chauvinism.

Naumann elaborates on this satirical interpretation of the already critical view of politics with a range of recognizable and one-of-a-kind chairs. Included in her installation is a replica of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Hill House Chair in the area the meme refers to as hedonism. It sits between a design inspired by Hans J. Wegner's rounded, Danish armchair that marks the liberal spot and an austere, miniature Shaker stool in the space designated for altruism. Also included are a generic, rolling desk chair symbolic of corporate lives spent in offices and a plush, dark brown reclining chair of questionable cleanliness that represents conservatism.



Henrike Naumann, *Horseshoe Theory* (detail), 2022. Henrike Naumann: *Re-Education*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2022. Wayfair "Stonehenge" bench, brown plastic folding chair, faux bois chair with bone faux fur, Adirondack-style 1990s high chair, Shaker one-step stool, Charles Rennie Mackintosh "Hill House"-style chair, walnut faux fur chair, Staples "Westcliffe" bonded leather computer chair, kneeling chair, rust brown recliner, antique horn chair, antique child's rocking chair, bone chair, milking stool; dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Benton.

and male chauvinism. These evolve, or devolve, into chairs made of animal horns and bones, connoting nationalism and fascism.

Apart from these last two chairs, the assortment has a lived-in feel. Sourced primarily from the greater New York City area, the presentation is a case study in the variety of styles people choose to live with. The installation puts humanity's tendency to associate design and taste with specific people and ideologies front and center. While the hedonist Mackintosh design might seem outlandish to some, to others it's as desirable as the chauvinist recliner.

Between the two ends of the horseshoe is a wall relief with the words "RADICAL CENTRIST" written in an austere style resembling ancient Greek letterforms and framed by satin curtains. Even the names of the colors and materials Naumann uses are layered with references. The curtains in *Radical Centrist* (2022) are in a bone color called Hilton, and the Benjamin Moore paint names throughout the show include Wall Street, Capitol White, and Bleeker Beige, nods to political and financial powers in the US. Like a constant indoctrination, the paint company famously mines American history for inspiration with collection lines such as Colonial Williamsburg (of which "Capitol White" is a part) and Historical Collection (Bleeker Beige).

Layered with cultural and historical meanings, the horseshoe is seen throughout the show. In addition to the chair formation, actual horseshoes are hidden in various locations, hanging from a door and on the ground in the courtyard outside. The latter, available for visitors to play the lawn game with which it is associated, references former President George H.W. Bush, who was known for his love of the sport. Marketing for Naumann's exhibition features an iconic image of Bush playing horseshoes with then-President Boris Yeltsin of Russia that took place during a historic visit to the White House in 1992 to mark the end of the Cold War.

Looming over the horseshoe chair installation is *Rustic Traditions* (2022), a pyramid of dark brown furniture, mainly desks and office storage. Farm equipment, including pitchforks, shovels, and pickaxes are interspersed throughout the display. Scaling the gallery wall, the monumental pile of objects resembles both an altar and a blockade. Naumann made the work as an embodiment of political extremism in response to the viral images that spread of rioters carrying weapons and farming tools while attacking the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. Naumann nods to the role of furniture in the event, specifically how items associated with order and political tradition, like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's lectern, became symbolic of anarchy after being stolen and carried away by a rioter. The overall shape of the installation also imagines what a blockade might have looked like as a tool for protection, as those who were inside sought to shield themselves with furniture barriers. A further nod to January 6th can be read in the horned and fur chairs in *Horseshoe Theory*.



Installation view: *Henrike Naumann: Re-Education*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2022. Benjamin Moore "Bone White" (OC-143), relief lettering, white IKEA curtain rods, bone-colored "Hilton" satin curtains, bone-colored ribbons. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Benton.



Installation view: *Henrike Naumann: Re-Education*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2022. Benjamin Moore "Capitol White" (CW-10), relief lettering, federal-style furniture, pitchforks, rakes, shovel, hammer, rock, rusted chain, "Original Marble-U.S. Capitol Steps 1865-1995" bookends. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Benton.

On the left of the furniture pyramid is a relief text in the same austere typeface as Radical Centrist that reads, “VERY FINE PEOPLE,” with the second part reading “ON BOTH SIDES” to the right. The phrase is taken from former President Donald Trump’s statements about the violent “Unite the Right” white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 during which a man deliberately drove his car into the crowd and killed a woman. The statement and Trump’s refusal to condemn white nationalists sowed the seeds for the violent uprising on January 6. Naumann underscores the way in which objects, design, and words become linked to political ideology and significant moments in history.

Throughout the show, there is an undercurrent of tension: political tension, stylistic tension, cultural tension. Objects that are familiar are subverted to reveal something deeper about the user. This feeling of tension explodes in a small room in the back of the gallery. Hidden behind the massive pyramid of furniture, the cave-like room is full of iconography associated with the Flintstones, including rocks, bones, and animal skin rugs. On the floor is a mat that reads “Welcome to Bedrock.” Playful at first, the room suddenly feels post-apocalyptic as a selection of Naumann’s films begins to play on the screens. Exploring a range of topics including fascism, Nazism, and club culture, the video works feel temporally and culturally removed from the rest of the exhibitions as if the viewers have found themselves in a bunker watching clips of past cultures. The objects and design people use to define themselves are layered with nuanced, evolving meaning. Throughout the show, meaning shifts depending on the context. Framing her own re-education with the deepening divide in the US, Naumann underscores just how powerful material culture can be in aligning with larger beliefs.

Contributor

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