

# Artspace

THE PHAIDON FOLIO

## "The Scene of the Crime Is the Bed": Artist Monica Bonvicini on the Allure of BDSM, and Making the Political Personal

By Artspace Editors

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Monica Bonvicini. Photo: Vogue Italia

*The Venice-born, Berlin-based artist **Monica Bonvicini** is obsessed with power. She sees it dwelling in our built environment (hence her infatuation with architecture's ability to control our lives) as well as wrapped up in the ever-present struggles around identity, sex, surveillance, and authority. These big ideas intersect in her multidisciplinary approach to her work, which ranges from [large scale installations](#) (for which she is best known) as well as [sculptures](#), [drawings](#), [photography](#), and [performance](#). (She quit [painting](#) while living in Berlin.) In this interview with the art*

*historian Alexander Alberro excerpted from [Phaidon's Monica Bonvicini](#), Bonvicini sheds light on her famously brash use of materials, the liberating nature of BDSM clubs, and how the personal is always political, even when we least expect it.*

**Alexander Alberro: Let me begin by asking about your studies. Where did you commence them? When? With whom?**

Monica Bonvicini: I started my studies in 1986 at the Hochschule der Künste Berlin, which today goes by the name of the UDK [Universität der Künste]. I applied while I was preparing myself for the art history exams that I had to pass in order to get into the Brera Academy [Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera] in Milan. Prior to that I had a meeting at the art school in Venice with the painter Emilio Vedova. He went through my portfolio and immediately offered to let me into his class. But I was a bit apprehensive of what studying in a beautiful city like Venice would do to my work. So I went to Berlin, where I [painted](#) large, loosely figurative canvases for years.

**Why did you stop painting?**

After a while, several years really, I began to realize that discussing color and old masters for hours on end as all my peers were doing was of no interest to me. Even after years of painting I still didn't care about the difference between cold or warm color. I was tired of hearing that my paintings were not about color but about light and shadow. So one day I just quit. I began to read about art that nobody was really talking about in Berlin at that time, like [Surrealism](#), or [Conceptual art](#). It was then that I discovered [Robert Barry's](#) early language works, which became very important for me, and the work of [Vito Acconci](#), Mary Miss, Robert Smithson, [Barbara Kruger](#), [Jenny Holzer](#), Cady Noland, and others. I also began to read the writings of [Michel] Foucault again, which I had read as a

teenager in Italy, and returned to the work of [Friedrich] Nietzsche, which had initially been one of the reasons why I wanted to learn German. I totally disconnected myself from the German romantic tradition of painting and drew on canvas and paper for an entire year. The drawings looked like [Minimal art](#) studies.

At around that time I enrolled in some welding courses and started to make small objects, models, which drove me crazy because I'm actually quite incapable of working on small things. It was then too that I met [Isa Genzken](#), who taught at the school as a guest-teacher. She was the first to ask me a question that turned out to be the question when I got to CalArts [California Institute of the Arts] a year or two later, which was "what do you want your art to say to its viewers?" I was dumbfounded by the question. I remember turning around and looking behind me to make sure there wasn't someone else in the room. It was like the Travis Bickle [Robert De Niro] scene in [Martin] Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976): "are you talking to me?" I mean, I had absolutely no audience at all, I had no shows, I had no one to say anything to with my artwork. So the question was a great wakeup call. Before leaving for Cal Arts I realized some small and larger sculptures, as well as a temporary [public work](#) that I developed with a colleague of mine.

In short, quitting painting wasn't a conscious decision. Over time I came to feel that painting was a way too lonely activity that required a certain sort of ego, or involvement, that I wasn't really interested in. I wanted to work with people. I was curious about different methods of production, and I didn't want to stay in the studio staring at what I painted. I guess I was looking for a different method of communication and interaction.

**Were there any remnants of your earlier painting training in the art you made in Los Angeles?**

No. By the time I got to Los Angeles I had left painting altogether. Already in Berlin I had started to work with construction materials, mostly with drywall, and I continued doing that at CalArts, though on a larger scale. I did three solo shows at CalArts. These were quite [architectural installations](#). I also made some small objects out of the stones one finds in cement sacks, and with the paint that was peeling off the wall at the school. CalArts had two painters on staff that painted all of the walls over and over again. If I remember correctly, \$200 a year from each art student's tuition fee went toward paying these guys to paint the walls of the classrooms and corridors which were perpetually being scuffed with footmarks, and graffiti, and stuff like that. There were layers and layers of white paint, and it kept peeling off. The layers of paint were like a history tagged onto the walls of the building, a witness of all that went on in terms of revolt, frustration, or just plain fun.

I also spent many nights in the darkroom at CalArts. I took many [pictures](#) of building sites, construction materials, and architecture, in and around Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and elsewhere on my many trips in the U.S., which I crossed twice by car that year.



*NOT FOR YOU, 2006*

**With whom did you work at CalArts?**

I mostly worked with Michael Asher, who was my mentor, and I met regularly with Allan Sekula and [Charles Gaines](#). Sekula was a fantastic teacher. His lectures were amazing. The first time I showed him my [black and white photographic work](#) he was very impressed. He was really struck by one picture in particular, and asked me what part of downtown Los Angeles I took it in. In fact, before he asked me he tried to guess the area of L.A. in which the picture was taken. But the fact of the matter is that I had taken that particular picture in the industrial area of Brescia, Italy, very close to where I grew up. When I told him that, we had a really good laugh, especially since everybody, including him, thinks of Italy as being a beautiful, romantic place, and forgets just how industrialized and desolate it can also look, or how much sites of production resemble each other around the globe.

**Tell me about the extent of your interest in the work of [Bruce Nauman](#)?**

Why are you asking about him?

**I'm asking because I've always considered your work to be in some kind of a relationship to his.**

Strangely enough, I can't recall the first time I saw Nauman's work, or how I initially got into his or Gordon Matta-Clark's work. That's interesting, because I can certainly recall my first encounters with the work of [Donald Judd](#) or [Richard Serra](#). Of course, if one works with [sculpture](#), which is fundamentally a vocabulary about space and its reception, then it's pretty much impossible not to consider Nauman. My favorite work of his is *Acoustic Wall* (1970), which consists of invisible walls. There's really nothing to see, nothing is built. Instead, the piece is about performativity, subjectivity, power, barriers, borders, behaviors, spectacle, habits, control, [institutional critique](#), and so on. There's so much packed into such a simple idea. One can go through the work and not see it, or start a sort of strange step dance with it in a gallery or museum. The possibilities the piece opens up are what makes it so interesting.

Nauman's works at once transcend and acknowledge different materials, different mediums. Much of his work demarcates space. His built sculptures and installations, [videos](#), [lights](#), sounds, languages, [performances](#), [drawings](#), all mark spaces. For me art has a lot to do with the question of what freedom is, or essentially with freedom itself. I always question what the work means, but also what it is? How it is built? For whom? And how to use and/or abuse it? That's why Nauman is so relevant to me and to so many artists. He once said that he tries to make art that hits you like a punch in the face. I definitely always felt very close to the directness of his works.

**That directness is also found in the work of someone like Valie Export, whose work I also see yours in dialogue with.**

Yes, especially her drawings. And talking about drawings, I also like those of Sue Williams and [Louise Bourgeois](#) very much too. In 2000 I made a video installation titled *Run TAKE One SQUARE or Two* that addresses the logic and program of different art practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s in terms of space, economical circumstances, and gender. The installation consists of two video-projections facing each other. One is related to the work of Nauman's *Playing a Note on the Violin While I Walk Around the Studio* (1967/68), and the other to Export's *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968). The soundtrack of the piece consists of a cacophony of the instrumental parts of two songs from the same period: **Lou Reed's** *Run, Run, Run* (1967) and **Neil Young's** *Running Dry (Requiem for the Rockets)* (1969). The songs come from one track, and a very annoying D note on the violin comes from the other. It's symptomatic that an artist like Nauman would get bored in his studio and produce works with a video camera given to him by his dealer, while someone like Valie Export would have no studio and was therefore compelled to go out to the street to produce works.

**Tell me more about your relationship with Asher?**

Well, as I said, he was my mentor at CalArts. We met at least once a week the entire year I spent there. I loved him as a person, as an artist, and as a teacher. He was caring and democratic, yet very critical and demanding at the same time. He was somebody who could spiral you into talks and discussions, just for the sake of it, and these discussions would sometimes last hours and hours. Just when you thought that you had finally gotten to the point, he would shift the argument in a different direction with a simple question that was at the same time so completely logical and interesting. He was an excellent interlocutor. He would debate issues without arrogance and without ideological pedantry. And yet all the while he was always very precise about how to discuss artworks, and how

to put them into question. His critique classes were not so much about results as about a culture of discussion. That works with me because I believe that questioning the production of meaning is at the core of making art. I would say that Nauman's *MAKE ME THINK ME* (1994) was something that Asher put under a microscope, perhaps a microscope that wasn't large enough for the last word "ME," but one that certainly encompassed the notion produced by the first three. He worked with the concentration and passion of a scientist to get people to think.



*BEDTIMESQUARE, 1999*

**How much of an effect did Minimalism have on your work?**

Though Minimalism is often related to the body, in terms of scale its affiliation is to architecture, to living spaces, and so on, I have always found Minimalist



artworks to be missing the sweat, the odors, and liquids of the human body. Plus these artworks are dead serious; their aesthetic is often so imperative but completely void of irony or humor. A few of my works relate consciously to a Minimalist aesthetic, especially to what I believed was missing from it. *Bedtimesquare* (1999) for instance, is based on [Carl] Andre's *Crib, Coin and Compound* (1965). The piece turns Andre's porous white slabs into an architectural material-catalogue in the form of a bed. I wanted to sex up the geometrical forms used in Minimalism. The sculpture I made out of chalk bricks, *7:30 hr* (1999-on going), looks very much like some of the art of Sol LeWitt. But in fact the work consists of tests that German students of masonry have to build in order to pass their final examination and gain their apprenticeship.

Around 2000, I was approached by the **Kunst-Werke in Berlin [KW-Institute for Contemporary Art]** to do something with LeWitt's *5 x 5 x 5* (1999). Along with the initial shock of the request, I was also taken aback when the technician informed me about how LeWitt's piece was constructed. As it turns out, the sculpture is hollow on the inside, and the bricks have been attached to a wooden cube that structures the entire piece. I didn't take them up on the offer. But in 2005 I exhibited a sculpture titled *Minimal Romantik* at the Venice Biennale. The piece consists of a cube of white bricks, the same size as the sculpture by LeWitt. During the three days of the opening of the Biennial three construction workers modeled the top of the cube into *Das Eismeer* (c.1823-24) by **Kasper David Friedrich**. Apart from showing them which part of Friedrich's painting they were to model, I didn't give them any instructions. After an initial moment of perplexity, they started, creating a lot of noise and dust. In the end they really did sculpt their own interpretation of the painting out of the brick-cube.

“*Don’t Miss a Sec.*” (2004) also relates to Minimalist forms, as well as to **Dan Graham’s** pavilions. Although Graham is not what one would call a traditional Minimal artist, he still addresses **modernism** via its most common and known architectural material. I put a functioning toilet inside the glass box, which is not a one-way-mirror cube but a combination of different kinds of glass that I tested and put together in order to get a similar effect but with more light transmission. The piece emphasizes in turn the many aspects of the glass architecture that followed on **Mies van der Rohe’s** *Barcelona Pavilion* (1929), and **Philip Johnson’s** *Glass House* (1949), and continues today in the ubiquitous Apple store with the glass facade.

I built *The Space* (1991) in my studio at CalArts out of drywall panels. It took up nearly the entire space, making it practically impossible to work in there.

Someone commented that the piece looked like a 1990s version of **Tony Smith’s** *Die* (1962). Using the same materials that the studio space was built out of, I set out to construct a cube-sculpture that at once defined and occupied my working space, making me unproductive. I’ve always been reluctant to embrace the idea of the studio as a space of production. Today I have a large studio in Berlin. But for many years I didn’t, only renting when I really needed one. I still don’t really like it very much when people come over to my studio.

Out of Minimalism came amazing sculptures, and they fundamentally changed the nature of the medium. Today I’m fascinated by the state of disintegration that some of the Minimalist works are now in, they’re falling apart, so they aren’t so perfect after all. They no longer seem to be the “meaningless” or “non-signifying” objects that they were once said to be.



*Minimal Romantik, 2005*

**The way you describe *Minimal Romantik* gives the piece a temporal dimension that one might miss when looking at the sculpture afterwards. How important is the element of performance for your artistic practice?**

The temporal dimension of *Minimal Romantik* was indeed important during the opening days of the exhibition. That year the Biennial was titled “The Experience of Art,” and I took the title very literally. Many people thought that the work was just not finished in time for the opening. The work was at the entrance of the Giardini, so the public had to walk through a cloud of dust just to see the Biennial, and I’m sure this led many to think the cliché that “these Italians never get things done in time...” But I wanted people to really experience art...

However, by the end of the run of the Biennial the work had become something

like a ruin: the pristine white bricks of early June became dirty, and Friedrich's slabs were covered with autumn leaves. In 2006 I realized *No Head Man*, a performance with four actors that ran during the opening days of the São Paulo Biennial. Although I rehearsed the piece for days, I was very clear that I didn't want it to be performed after the professional opening. Many years ago I prepared a performance I thought I would perform myself. It was based on a collection of quotations and writings on gender issues that I had put together, along with a collection of music tracks and noise samples that I meticulously composed so that the spectator could hear some parts of the read text, while others would not have been heard because the music was too loud. The performance didn't take place because I got sick, though perhaps I got sick because I was too nervous to carry it out.

I think there's always a degree of vanity in performances, which I'm quite uncomfortable with. But I like the immateriality of performances, their ephemeral nature. Typically, a performance takes place at a particular moment in time. Though Performance art emerged in opposition to the usual, one could say "classical" manner of producing artworks, in the end the specific timing and the exclusivity of viewing Performance art is often reductive and conservative. What I'm interested in is performativity, not performance in itself. I like to involve the audience in my work, encouraging them to perform the piece, complete it, destroy it, live it, make it loud, and bring it to a different level than that of just simply walking silently around it. Performativity provides me with a way to get into a physical and direct dialogue with the viewers, turning them into an integral part of the work. It is also a way for me to put into question the notion of what public space is, extending that space, for example, to the space of a museum.

**Your projects often feature language. From where do you draw this linguistic interest?**

I have always been interested in language. As a teenager I wanted to become a writer. I learned to write in Kindergarten; I found it the same as drawing a line onto a white sheet of paper. The difference was that while everybody seemed to understand the written words, that was not at all the case with drawings, which were usually accompanied with annoying questions about meaning. The interpretation of words seemed mechanical, and universally decipherable.

When I was still in Italy, I used to spend hours discussing the legitimacy of some words. I believed that in order to make a point one has to be as clear and detailed as possible, since only a precise point is accessible to others. When I moved to Berlin, I went through a period of time in which I questioned all my beliefs about language. The same happened when I started at CalArts. Anyone who has moved to a different country knows how it feels to be confronted with a foreign language, or with a language that one does not really have a mastery of. It's quite a destabilizing experience. I was practically mute for several years. Language is a fiction; understanding requires words, but so does misunderstanding.

Today, I have no trust whatsoever in language, and I never take language for granted. This is a feeling that is only reinforced by the experience of translation, which often requires acrobatic jumps. Some of the titles of my works cannot be translated because of the word combinations I used. Instead, I'm interested in mining the territories of language, and in making language tremble, confusing it, and creating new relations and associations.

**To what extent have questions related to feminism influenced your work?**

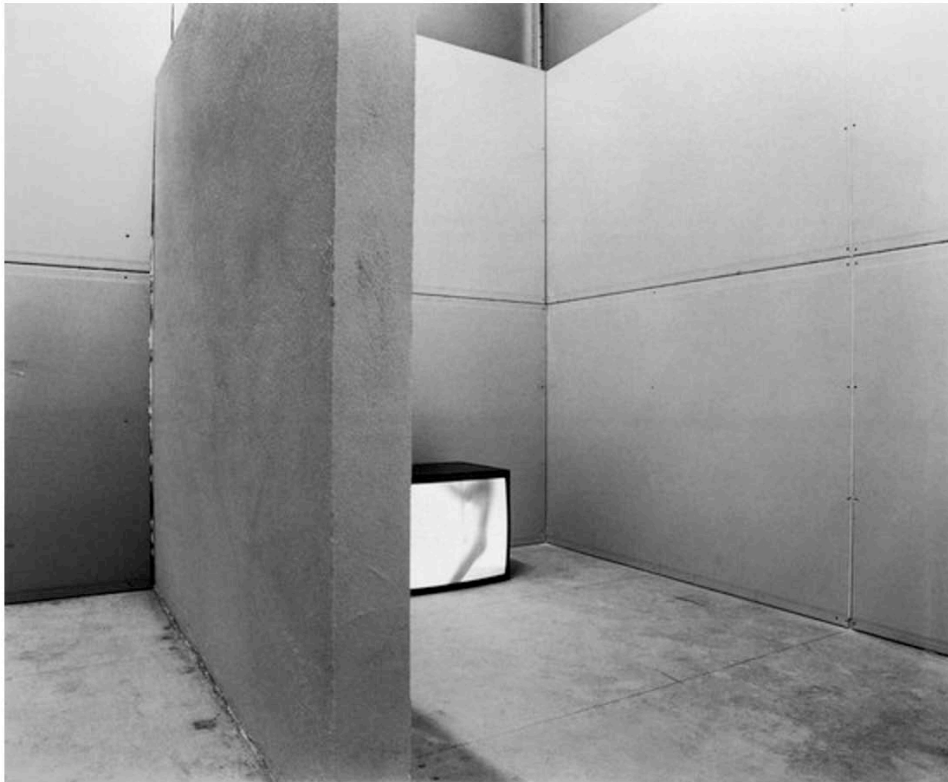
As far as I'm concerned, feminism is an historical movement that really changed the way people consider life. It's a truly revolutionary idea, or movement, which is still very much alive. The issues that created feminism are still there to be discussed, worked on, and developed further. I do reject the whining aspect of feminism that has all-too-often been illustrated in exhibitions: the idea of the woman as a victim. I'm more interested in the liberation possibilities that feminism opened up. I like the energy and the sense of urgency that was originally at the start of the movement. I'm very grateful to all the female artists who paved the road for artists of my generation and further. I see it as my responsibility to know that history and to be supportive of other women artists as well. The glass ceiling still exists. When I first started to have shows, I wasn't consciously involved in feminism. I became interested in and influenced by gender studies in the 1990s. My interest was in exploring and redefining spaces, including their history, from a gender point of view.

After I exhibited *Wallfuckin'* (1995-96), journalists started to ask me if I was a feminist. I had no problem in saying yes, since as far as I'm concerned it's quite natural to be one. But I remember very clearly how surprising the question was for me. I also found it quite reductive: the fact that there was a naked woman in the video led the work to be simply recognized, understood and labelled as "traditional" feminist art: like that's what they do, get naked and make a little performance. Following this basic logic a lot of art critics and curators thought that the naked woman had to be the artist herself, which wasn't the case. The work has been compared to Vito Acconci's masturbation performance [*Seedbed*, 1973], and, for example, never to **Paul McCarthy's** *The Garden* (1991-92), which I

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

saw at MoCA in Los Angeles sometime around 1992. Since then, a lot of my artworks that really have little or nothing to do with feminism or gender issues have been described by lazy critics as feminist. I find this quite banal and dismissive.

On a more personal level, there are a lot of things that still make me angry: like never having hangers in women's size in hotel rooms, or always having to change the wheel of my bike because they are always based on male size. I also rejected jobs in art schools that didn't have enough female teachers. Being the first female teacher in Austria and choosing female assistants really blew my mind. The majority of Italian and German political magazines have mostly male journalists commenting on different issues. And I don't even want to get into the discrepancies between the percent of women that study art and those that end up in galleries or able to live off of their work.



*Wallfuckin', 1995/96 (installation view)*

**What led to your interest in psychoanalytic concepts such as fetishism, masochism, and sadism?**

As far as I'm concerned, anything that's defined and labelled as deviant, or manifesting some sort of sickness, is worth trusting. If one is thinking about occupying places with one's work, then one is thinking about power relationships. If one really believes that the personal is political, then the first scene of the crime is the bed.

I read very early on **[Sigmund] Freud's** *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), **Carl Jung**, **Eric Fromm**, **Wilhelm Reich**.... It was all pretty much at the same time as the first translation into Italian of **Erica Jong's** *Fear of Flying* (1973) was published, as well as *Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), and, of course, Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1961). I learned about the **Marxist** concept of fetishism in high school, where I was lucky enough to have a great economics teacher who had studied sociology with **[Renato] Curcio** in Trento back in the good old days. I was also interested in **Franco Basaglia's** idea of democratic psychiatry, which was still much discussed when I was a teenager.

Confining people, defying sicknesses, and diseases, are things that I always found rather creepy. Over the years I have read a lot about these issues, from **[Jacques] Lacan** and **[Jean-Martin] Charcot** to **Sylvère Lotringer**.

In the 1990s, I went with friends to gay sadomasochism clubs in New York City and London. I found these places very liberating – even though the first time I visited the police raided and everyone had to leave the premises. Those clubs showed me a world that was less about barriers and limits than the usual heterosexual clubs I knew.



Art always has sexual references. My interest in surrealism, literature, and music, and my approach to sexuality from a gender point of view in the 1990s, all brought me to read a lot of literature on themes like pornography, masochism, and sadism from a female point of view.

**To what use do you put materials in your work? How you decide what material to use for a particular work?**

I use materials to translate ideas. I treat the materials I use to make my artworks as a sort of alphabet that allows me to formulate a specific issue or theme. I often start a work with drawings. It's a complex process of research and collecting ideas, texts, and so on, in order to arrive at a form, a material that can convey the idea I'm working with. The process often involves meetings with professional people – people who have knowledge and experience of production in specific fields. Of course, I have a material archive in my studio. As a sculptor, I'm very curious about materials, about what's possible and what isn't as far as materials are concerned. I actually prefer to do things with materials that one is not supposed to do with them. I mean, I use a lot of materials, tools that normally have a specific function, and I like to reshape that function, to shift it in another direction.

**Why do you use building materials so often in your work?**

I started using building materials when I began to work with sculpture. Since I was interested in ideas about space, I became interested in architecture; it seemed very logical to use the same materials the spaces I was interested in were built with. Perhaps the fact that I was never trained in sculpture kept me away

from the more classical sculptural materials such as chalk, bronze casting, and the like.

**But why do you favor industrial materials that reference the modernist canon, such as metal and glass?**

I wouldn't say that I do. The first piece I made out of metal and (broken) glass was *Stonewall* (2001), which was a work influenced by the G8 meeting in Genoa that year that ended with a great degree of violence. I used scaffolding pipes in order to make a connection to the police barricades, which look pretty much the same in every country.

I regularly work with so many different materials, including photography, digital prints, video, spray paint, [graffiti](#), and, as we discussed earlier, drywall, bricks, wood, “fake” or real mirrors, Plexiglas, electrical tools, et cetera. I often work with materials that one can find at any DIY store. I like to be very, if you like, down to earth in the choice of materials. I just work with what is already there, and then I have fun in changing it. For years now I've been using the same acrylic paint for my big drawings, which is a paint that art supply stores don't stock. I get it at hardware stores. A case in point is a work such as *Turning Walls* (2003).

I suppose you could say that a piece such as *We Finally Built Walls* (2010) is related to the modernist idea (or wish) of living in a glass house, precisely about the uneasy or uncanny feeling of living in plain view. I developed the work for the solo show I had at the **Fridericianum**. It consists of a sort of wall out of glass, with panels that stem from the glass ceiling of the Vienna Secession. The material of the first “white space” that got into the “first museum” in Europe. I painted quotations that I collected through the years on the glass panels. You might recognize where some of the quotations come from, or just read them as a sort of concrete poetry. I used wood for the supporting structure because I wanted to

underline the instability and temporality of what is connected to glass façades and transparency. The title of the work is actually a quotation by **Rudy Fuchs** about the **Documenta 7** that I found in **Douglas Crimp's** book *On the Museum's Ruins* (1995). *Built for Crime* (2006), which is again a sort of commentary on glass facades, is made out of broken safety glass letters, light bulbs, and dimmer packs.



*White Socks, 2009*

I'm interested in building things without playing the role of architect. But I have nothing against using building materials that are related to architecture, especially once the project starts to get big in scale and is permanent.

*She Lies* (2010), is built of cement (for the pontoon), as well as stainless steel and glass panels. For this piece I was interested in working with the idea of the ruin via romanticism, modernism, and urban development, which is something that related to the conditions of that specific site. *She Lies* resembles a modernistic façade that has been crashed, or “crushed.”

I developed *RUN* (2012) when the Olympic Park in London was under construction. Similar to *She Lies*, *RUN* is a permanent public work for a place that is yet to be, a place that is yet to come, a place with no real identity yet. The work's three letters are 8 meters tall. I developed an inside structure that can produce the effect of an infinite and psychedelic light. I could not have built those two works out of cardboard. However, I have to admit that until now I haven't used many anthropomorphic forms or materials. Perhaps the closest I've ever come to making something like that is *Identify Protection* (2006), or *White Socks* (2009), though in both works most of the materials have been immersed in a bath of liquid black latex.

**What do you hope to accomplish by combining industrial materials with the apparatuses of sexual fetishism, such as leather, chains, and rubber?**

Well, in my works I address certain issues that are related to the time I am living in. Industrial materials are inherent to it. Chains and rubber are industrial materials. The chains I use are the kinds that are commonly used on construction sides to hoist things up. I always order them from an international lifting company. Likewise, the rubber that I use is an industrial liquid rubber, the type

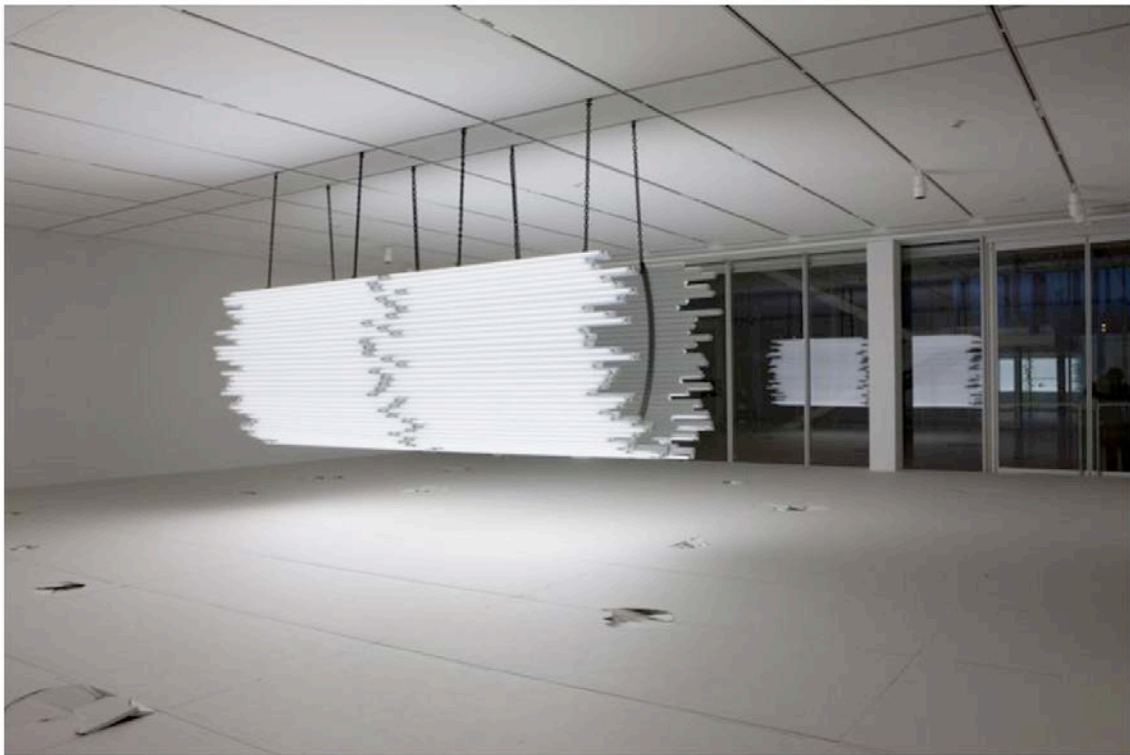
that is normally used to coat tools and the like. I also used rubber sprays, the kind used for automobile tires. As far as leather is concerned, I started working with this material when I was working on the installation *The Fetishism of Commodity* (2002), the *Leather Tools* (2009) or *Pavilion* (2002). Leather seemed to make perfect sense for this piece. After all, I was thinking about art and architecture as a production of fetish fantasies. I also have the impression that instruction manuals have increasingly structured sexuality.

**You occasionally smash materials. Explain this impulse to me. Do you believe that destruction is a form of creation?**

I have often said that there is no construction without destruction. I don't think that artists just create things out of their own flowery fantasies. As **[Vladimir Lenin]** once said, the aim is to be more radical than reality is. Try that! But the truth of the matter is that to date the only material I've ever smashed in order to make an artwork is glass. That's what glass is there for in the first place. Like the glass cube on the first floor of *Stairway to Hell* (2003) in Istanbul, or *White* (2003). In general, though, I'm not very happy with the aesthetic result of my smashing glass. The process has a lot to do with the force applied to the hammer, and I'm not very strong. The best results I can manage are nice, perfect circles, and of course that's not something I like. Many of the reviews of the smashed glass pieces mistakenly say that I used a gun to shoot and break the glass. This is not accurate at all. To shoot a gun requires a totally different approach. Its actions relate to different issues, its violence is detached and evokes issues I am not interested in talking about. I'm using a hammer, not a gun, not a stone. There is a sense to that. I've actually also applied some vandalism to my own works early on such as in *I Believe in The Skin of Things as in That of Women* (1999), or thrown paint

on drawings, staining so to speak, what I've drawn, as in, for example, *The Greater The Pleasure or Desire* (2006).

So, yes, destruction is surely inherent to creation. To create and to destroy are two sides of the same coin.



*Light Me Black, 2009 (installation view)*

**Electric light effects are also a feature of much of your work. What result do you seek from the technology of light?**

I've been working with light for quite a few years now. Mostly with translucent lights, or light bulbs, nothing fancy. I personally like really bright white light, I call it "garage light," a light that sort of blinds you and leaves no space for shadows. I always ask for that kind of light for my works in museums or galleries.

I'm not as much interested in the particular technology of light as I am in the kind of space that light can create. And by space I don't mean moody space or

anything like that. Light, even though its effect is immaterial, can at the same time define space, can create or delete walls. Maybe the same thing happens with air – it surrounds us at all times but we can't really grasp it, though we can clean it, or control its temperature, and the like. This is something I was interested in when I made *A Violent, Tropical, Cyclonic Piece of Art Having Wind Speeds of or in Excess of 75 mph* (1998), or with the photo series I did of the air conditioning system in Cal Arts, "Where Air Dwells" (1992). But getting back to the question of light, a work like *Light Me Black* (2009), required the guards of the Art Institute of Chicago to wear sunglasses. The lumen of the works corresponded with the translucent lights in the modern wing of the Art Institute designed by **Renzo Piano**, mostly in corridors, bathrooms, and offices. This is different from the light normally used for art. For *RUN*, I used high-tech LED products. This was the first time I worked with these materials. But the hallucinatory and psychedelic effects of the piece were not the result of the around 8.000 LED itself; rather, it was the inside construction that I developed that produced the powerful reflections, and an almost physical deepness. When one stands in front of the nine-meter-high letters, one begins to feel as if one can fall into them. The letters create a space, which is not as much about illusion as about a rejection of such a space. One can feel it but can't quite inhabit it.

**From where does your interest in architecture arise?**

Immediately after my studies, I would start all of my ultimately unsuccessful grant applications with the following sentence: "You can avoid people but you can't avoid architecture." What I meant is that one always has to deal with walls, doors, windows, some of which are too small or not quite in the position that one would like them to be. One has to walk until the next block or passageway before one can take a left or a right; we live and move in spaces that were already there

before we came to use them. Perhaps we could live without art, theatre, opera, literature, cinema, music, a very sad life indeed, but we couldn't live without architecture. Everyone needs a roof over her head. That's pretty much a universal need.

At the same time, I never really interiorized the idea of home, of the homely, of private space, of spaces for which slippers are made. I always felt more at ease on the street than at home. Architecture brings a lot of things together, like identity, sexuality, the private and the public, politics, economics. Art does too, though in a different way. In order to think and to make art, I needed something that was similar but not quite the same.

I'm also very sensitive to spaces. When I first arrived in Berlin, I had to go to what at the time was called the "Ausländerpolizei." After many hours of waiting in a room, some bureaucrat called me to a booth that was so frightfully small that I couldn't even stretch out my arms. So there I was, registering my poor and unwelcome self into some clerical book, or whatever. Many of us know this type of space. As it turns out, I'm quite claustrophobic; I can't be, or work, in small rooms.





*Stairway to Hell, 2003 (installation view)*

**What does architecture as an institution signify for you? And what exactly do you consider to be the relationship between architecture and art?**

Architecture as an institution? Well, how about corruption, dreams, state ambitious, abuse, class power, money, the representation of authority. In **[Pier Paolo] Pasolini's** *Mamma Roma* (1962), Anna Magnani says something like: “in the fascist period, Mussolini asked a rich developer to ‘build me a neighborhood for people!’ So the developer built the first house as a kind of prototype, which was a great house, it had fantastic walls and even better toilets.... When Mussolini

saw this house he said, 'Bravo, exactly as I imagined,' build some more. But in the end they built just the toilets and omitted the houses." All dictators and magnanimous state presidents use architecture as a way, or as an excuse, to connect politics with culture, and of course to "build" history as well. Architecture best represents ideologies of power. As far as the second part of your question goes, I've always considered the systems of architecture and of art to be very similar, or at least to work in similar ways. I think it was **Mark Wigley** who wrote that architecture creates, via all the magazines, books, symposiums, discussions, and the like, a sort of barricade that at once leaves the non-professionals outside and makes any sort of attack or critique from the inside impossible. I think that the institution of art does much the same thing. You are allowed to do anything as an artist, you can be blind, crazy, or dead serious. The question is really: can you ever expand the boundaries? Who defines them? Who determines them? Where are they actually?

**Really? I've always thought of the system of architecture as much more powerful than that of art. But perhaps you're right. Indeed, it seems that much of your work is about power relationships. How do you define power?**

You're right; the system of architecture might be stronger, surely heavier, than the one of art. But if you look at it from a theoretical point of view, you can find similar connections. The question about power is a difficult one, and I wish I had a ready answer, but I don't. Power is all that dictates behavior, all those things that direct people how to think and act. Power is about the need to keep individuals in their place, even to the extent that it tells individuals what their right place is. Of course, the question about power relationships is in the end a question about what freedom might be.

**What about identity? What led you to explore identity issues in the concerted way that you do?**

I really started to think about the question of “identity” when I was at CalArts. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was a lot of talk and art production about what was referred to as “the third generation.” Some of those discussions, as with some of the artworks, were more interesting than others, though for the most part they all remained very much within the realm of a personal history. I’m not very much interested in personal experiences or stories when it comes to art. I’m happy to relate these experiences over dinner, or when meeting with friends. But when it comes to art, discussions about identity inevitably have to be discussions about the frames or lenses that create identity, that shape it and determine it. For instance, if I’m researching a historical figure, I find that I get much more information from looking at the spaces that that person inhabited and the places he or she worked in than from looking at a photographic portrait of the person. I guess I just prefer spaces to people.

Going a bit further, I think that to question the construction of sexual identity is once again to think about issues such as the cultural imperatives in existence at a particular time, the power and freedom of the spaces and social structures in which one resides. I’m not at all interested in talking about my own experiences. My artwork isn’t primarily about me, about my identity, or about whatever unresolved issues I might have. As I said earlier, art is not a therapy, at least not from my perspective.

**How do you decide what to exhibit in a particular place?**

Well, it’s not exactly like I go around looking for places in which I’d like to exhibit. Normally, I’m invited to do a show or a project somewhere, and that’s

how the place is decided, though I usually decline shows in very old and fucked up buildings where their previous function is still quite visible, like empty or abandoned hospitals, schools, prisons. The best you can do with such places are things that Matta-Clark has already done.

In the past few years, I've tried to get away from making site-specific works, or at least works that are only site-specific. But this is difficult, and sometimes I have to hit the breaks on my impulse to make the perfect work in terms of the critique it carries out of a specific gallery or museum, of its art program or architecture. Perhaps deep inside I'm really a transient squatter, occupying spaces and turning them upside down, only to leave them and move on to somewhere else.



*Never Again, 2005 (installation view)*

When I was a student, and even for some time afterwards, I worked as an exhibition installer, installing many different kinds of shows. I installed

exhibitions in almost all of Berlin's major institutions. And I got to know those institutions well. I knew the employees' entrance, the tools in the workshops, the guards' wages, and the exhibition spaces, even what they looked like when they were completely empty of art and visitors. I made a piece about these spaces called *Building up for Art* (1996), which exists as both an installation and a series of black and white photographs. A work like *Never Again* (2005) was the product of my experience of the **Hamburger Bahnhof** in Berlin. Things have changed quite a bit since that time, but in 2005 the Hamburger Bahnhof wasn't what one would call the most "friendly" museum in Berlin. When I was approached to do a work there, I initially proposed a different project, but the budget for it couldn't be found. So within a month I developed *Never Again*, upsetting all the people related to the show. In this case, as often, I wanted to produce a type of work that at least I never saw in that museum before. *Never Again* is very loud. One could hear the sound of the chains as soon as one walked into the large hall of the Hamburger Bahnhof, as soon as one entered the museum. It's also an artwork people can use; it's like a playground for adults. People would get on the swings and move them back and forth so hard that the guards often had to stop them before anyone got hurt. It was a Luna Park-type of atmosphere.

*Never Again* also has a very strong S/M aesthetic, recognizable as such by everyone. But the aesthetic is twisted through the function of the swings. I designed them based on regular love swings. But they were all double-hung. So they really couldn't be used as regular love swings. When no one was using the swings, the space almost seemed morgue-like, reflecting the atmosphere of the Hamburger Bahnhof as it was at that time. I wanted, besides other things, to bring some life into the rooms of the museum. So, in that sense perhaps, *Never Again* was very specific to the Hamburger Bahnhof. But still, I don't think that it's really a site-specific installation, because it's a work that raises issues that relate

to a lot of other art institutions as well. I mean, the logic of *Never Again* is not that different from that of *Plastered* (1998), because both works seek to shake the postulate of a museum as a place for dead art, or for the sublime experience of art, what is public, what is private, and so on.

**It occurs to me that you've mentioned the word "space" quite a lot in our discussion. What exactly does this concept mean to you?**

"Space" is something I always think about in English. I don't use the word as much in Italian or German as I do in English. Space is for me all about construction. By construction I mean communication, language, sculptures, systems, situations... actually, pretty much everything.

The title of my first, very thin monograph catalogue is *Platz Machen* (1994). The title has a twist: in German it means something between to clean up or to get rid of something, and the imperative that one says to a dog in order to get it to sit. For the cover I used a photograph I took from an airplane approaching Los Angeles, an endless landscape of single-family houses: beautiful and scary at the same time. Space is always something that is possible to occupy, physically with works or just with ideas, with language.



*Leather Tools, 2009*

**Are formal and aesthetic questions important for you?**

Such questions aren't really my main concern. On the other hand, I certainly appreciate a work that brings the formal and aesthetic components together in a clear way. I don't need to have too much elaboration or spin. I like artworks that get to the point very quickly.

**Yes, your works certainly do get to the point, but a lot happens along the way. Indeed, I've often been intrigued by the underlying humor in your work. Do you consider humor to be an important component of your artistic production? Or would satire be a better way to define the ludic dimension in much of your art?**

Satire? No. I think humor is more individual, less classified, and institutionalized than satire. I like and appreciate satire, its history, but humor is something else. It's the door in the wall where there is no door. Satire can stay in the room, it doesn't need to break through or out. The humor in my work has a lot to do with teasing, both the audience and myself. It's not about a statement or a joke that's perfect for the weekly news, but about, at least in the good cases, creating a state of timeless instability, or of non-judgment, or even something very close to embarrassment. I believe that humor is important and even necessary in order to avoid art's falling into didacticism or arrogance. When it really comes down to it, all of the artists and artworks that I appreciate have a healthy dose of humor, even if critics often miss it.

So, yes, humor is an important component of my work. I find that it enables art to surprise, to twist expectations, to put into question all pre-existing judgments and conventions. And yet, humor isn't something that's very easy to explain. It's probably the most unspeakable, inarticulable thing there is in social interaction.