File Note 132

Olga Balema

Essay by
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Computer

The flip between the wet and the dry admits many points in between.
Pamela M. Lee[1]

At the time of my writing, Olga Balema's *Computer* (2021) is in progress. Fragmentary impressions of the work build up through subsequent visits with the artist during winter 2021. A scaled model of the gallery at Camden Art Centre — *Computer*'s final destination — offers a counterpoint to our situation in New York, just as the sense of another place evoked by the work overlaps with its situated material conditions. This is, therefore, an exercise in reversal.

I look at *Computer* and I am transported to a secluded garden with a pond somewhere in it, landlocked yet vibrant. Upon the blue water, yellow ginkgo leaves swirl in my prismatic daydream. At once concrete and abstract, all surface and absolutely generic, the vision is bottomless in space and time and I get lost in it.[2] From *fin-de-siècle* prints to mass-produced rugs, this patterned surrogate of nature has assuaged the stresses of urban living ever since architecture and industry first joined forces in Victorian times, when the areas around Camden Art Centre were developed.

My wherewithal dries up and I come to a standstill. A plastic billboard is displaced? The medium of publicity, in its habitual use the plastic tapestry is sewn or otherwise firmly secured high up on a metal frame or on façades of buildings for rent. The same material now stretches horizontally on the art gallery's parquet. It displays pictures of a rug, but their deliberate pixelation precludes sensual plenitude. Within and outside the studio, a range of operations distress the once homogenous surface, endowing it with haptic qualities.

Everything is generated by balancing outside elements and an involved editing process. Jpegs of *Prismatic Daydream Rug* ® are shared with a professional sign printer to be rendered in a loose array.[3] The redundancy of the grid signals the interplay of different registers: the fibres of the plastic, of the printed rugs, their distribution, the pixels. The essential qualities of the work are now built into the synthetic fabric, offering something useful to edit from, rub into, cut

through, splay open, stick together again. Exceeding the surface of the artist's studio, occasionally the cumbersome work is rolled up and dragged onto various New York streets, where more scuffing and frottage of the rough, geometric sidewalks is generated. If the white plastic expanse recalls back-lit touchscreens, a motley of square incisions brings back the ancient technology of computer keys. Taped plastic fragments now lie astray upon its surface as if the result of a glitched reproduction process. Through these repetitive operations the total shape of the sculpture stays the same, yet its topology changes, disrupting the ratio of positive and negative space, figure and ground, opening up room for more traces to accumulate.

The sculpture is a place; it cannot be seen in its entirety from a single point, yet to walk on it is to soil it. We tread on it carefully, weighing whether to skirt its blue areas or rather to dive into them. As such, *Computer* lends itself to a different way of being inhabited. It demands that we consider our position on the work, and by extension, in the institution that hosts it. After the private promise of comfort offered by the pleasant image comes our public discomfort about sidestepping visiting protocols and impacting form-making. Is the object the locus of vulnerability, or does it mirror ours? The work's relativity to site, its openness to incidental qualities, and the anonymity of something approaching a found object, are characteristics that *Computer* shares with earlier works by the artist.

Consider the Styrofoam-and-tape constructions that Balema presented at New York's 2019 Whitney Biennial, *Leaf* and *Floor* (both 2019). One stretched thin from the ceiling all the way down to open up into a pinched oval shape that grazed the floor; the other doubled the site where wall and floor meet, all the while making it weird: brick-like wall material lined up on the floor, while faux terrazzo carpeted the wall.[4] The unease was yours if you paid attention, but you risked altering the works' tenuous balance by getting too close. The disturbance was mutual, and what is natural in a museum space after all?

A sense of reciprocal threat is similarly present in Balema's water sculptures (2013–ongoing), shells of soft, heat-sealed PVC that contain

pop plastics, metal scraps, or other materials submerged in water. Turgid and on the brink of bursting, they contain indigestible leftovers and remake themselves over time — the tint of the water changes as the objects release oxides or other artificial colouring. The water sculptures' affinity with cellular organisms is displaced in *brain damage* (2019) through the choice of material, a garment-quality elastic band that typically fits the shape of the body while leaving a mark on our skins.[5] Whereas the water sculptures reproduce themselves, *brain damage* was open to reconfiguration due to an inherent iterability. Partially painted and half-heartedly tacked together, the elastic slouched on the gallery floor while grafting onto the lower portion of its walls, alternating moments of tension with ripples of slackness, as if presenting the dispersed effects of the titular injury.

For Balema, the physical and psychological character of the gallery is one starting point, the relationship and proportions between parts is another. As such, her sculptures enter into dialogue with site-responsive artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s — that is, works that presented a reciprocity between the body of the sculpture and the cultural space that surrounds it. To parse similarities and differences with that earlier sculptural vocabulary is to highlight the specificity of Balema's 'formulations'.[6] One can see a fleeting game of quotation at play in her work, articulated through an attentiveness to form, materials and processes of making. The distributed composition of *brain damage*, for one, calls to mind Barry Le Va's horizontally dispersed sculptures, while its acrylic-dipped elastics recall the coloured acrylic yarns that Fred Sandback strung floor to ceiling or wall to wall.[7] Whereas Le Va's dispersions present us with the aftermath of a violent action in their forensic stillness, and Sandback's yarns bring the space alive by creating shimmering virtual planes, Balema's elastics are still going but burnt-out, as if caught in the act of trying. The mastery over chance at play in Le Va, or the experience of calmness elicited by Sandback's perceptual focus, moreover, are unsettled by Balema's activation of our peripheral vision in her work. In *brain damage,* the latitude of perceptual field, in addition to the somatic connotation of its primary material,

combine to blur the distinction between viewed object and viewing subject.

Balema's *Floor* and *Leaf* recall another paradigmatic work of Minimalist sculpture, Carl Andre's *Lever* (1966), where fire bricks constitute the basic unit of a floor-bound sculpture. Andre laid the bricks edge to edge to form a line that projects from the wall and cuts the gallery space, altering its proportions and our movements in the process. In *Floor* and *Leaf*, Balema similarly employed 'bricks' as the primary unit to intervene in the museum space. Yet unlike *Lever*, the constitutive elements of *Floor* and *Leaf* only bear a resemblance to bricks and avoid adding up to one singular axis. Instead, they are shaped from a lightweight, synthetic material and taped to approximate alignments. The elemental certainty of *Lever* is but a memory, and Balema's biomorphic additions further deviate from Andre's rigorous module, just as the applied patterns and textures are superfluous to structure per se, but essential to hold things together. 'One thing after another was a way to escape from setting up relations', goes the canonic account of Minimalist sculpture.[8] The opposite is true in Balema's works, where everything is relational, internally and externally. Andre's sculptural syntax, in its structural affinity to discrete, measurable units of labour-time, deliberately aligned the artist with blue-collar workers.[9] Composed of unassimilable leftovers, self-remaking over time, and alluding to fallen vegetation or other forms of biological exhaustion in their titles, Balema's sculptures direct us instead to a different framework. The vital forces of nature, traditionally presented as external to, yet available for, an all-consuming capitalist value-system, are revealed as tied in a web of relations that constantly reshape one another.[10]

'Interiors becoming exteriors becoming interiors,' the artist once said of her work.[11] At Camden, *Computer* operates in the space between the formal present of the work and the historical contradictions of the site that hosts it through the trope of the *jardin d'eau*. By choosing the image of a rug with yellow gingko leaves on blue water, printing it multiple times at varying degrees of pixelation upon billboard material,

Olga Balema, installation view at the Whitney Biennale, New York, 2019. Photo: Gregory Carideo

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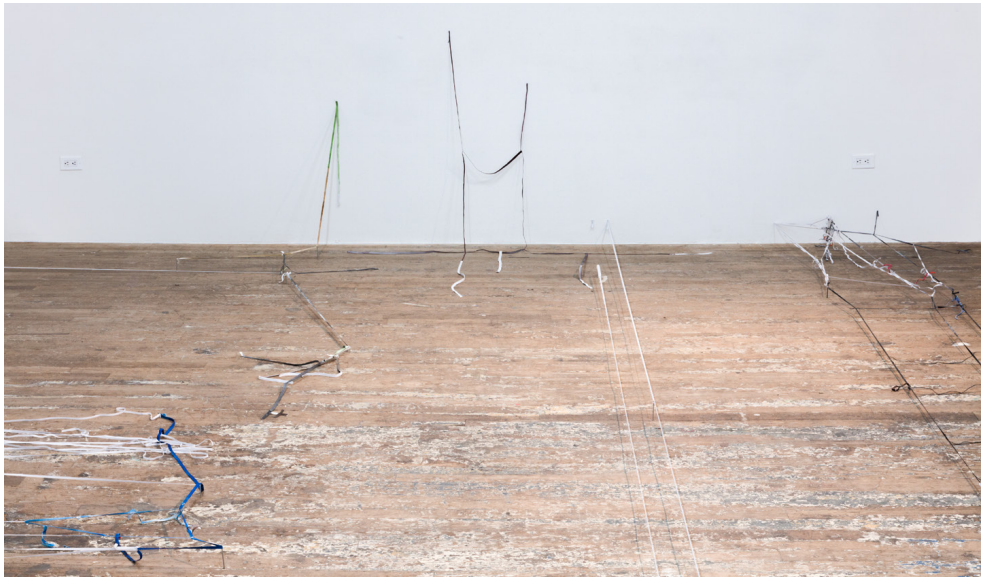
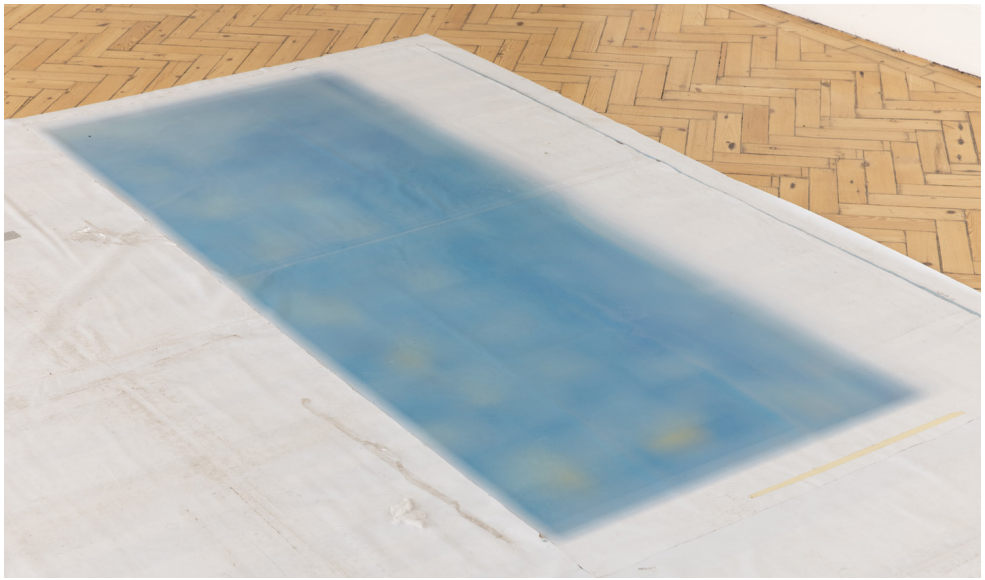


Olga Balema, *brain damage*, installation view at Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019.
Photo: Gregory Carideo

Olga Balema, *Computer*, installation view at Camden Art Centre, London, 2021. Photo: Rob Harris



Olga Balema, *Computer*, installation view at Camden Art Centre, London, 2021. Photo: Rob Harris

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and rendering it dry and dirty and horizontal, Balema seems to be testing the enduring validity of a shared fantasy. The trope brings me back to another *jardin d'eau*, Claude Monet's, and his most famous series, *Water Lilies* (1897–1926). Painted over almost three decades, the series comprises some 300 canvases of varying sizes, depicting water lilies and other accidents upon the surface of a secluded pond — the Impressionist's own property in Giverny, France.

In spite of Monet's oft quoted statement, 'One instant, one aspect of nature contains it all', there is in fact very little *nature* there.[12] Everything begins with the circulation of a marketable image of Japan following the opening of trade routes with England and France in the 1850s.[13] Nature is engineered to mirror that image. Monet purchased lotuses and water lilies seen at the Paris World Fair of 1889 to be disposed upon his artificial water garden, the result of innovative hydraulics and landscaping techniques.[14] Paintings were made that, in their final, monumental format, cut across art, architecture and decoration to submerge the viewer. Nature at Giverny today continues to be up-kept to mirror the paintings. The water lilies are not even actually rooted, we learn, but potted in floating vases.[15] Monet gradually moved his work station onto his so-called Japanese bridge to take horizontal views of the aquatic life. From that vantage, the works dispense with Western conventions of landscape painting, there is no repoussoir, and the viewer is immersed in a disorienting field of unmixed swaths of colour. The boundaries of the subject are less distinct in the process, such that World War I veterans visiting Paris's Orangerie, where the *Water Lilies* were installed in 1927, suffered panic attacks because the display triggered flashbacks from the trenches.[16]

A blind spot in literature on Victorian visual culture is the link between the transformation of nature from the novel scale of capitalist noxiousness, and its surrogate reappearance in secluded urban gardens and domestic interiors via patterned screens, wallpaper, tapestries and costumes — as well as their various relations to the body of workers living in increasingly smaller, less affordable, more unlivable dwellings. The reproduction of nature remains successful

to this day, as *Prismatic Daydream Rug* ® attests. It is still marketable because it promises affluence: it is nice, evocative, enveloping — all while being productively disorienting. Like Monet's late *Water Lilies*, Balema's is a hybrid artwork that produces its own geography. Rather than eliciting traumatic returns, however, *Computer* takes us on a trip that shifts our social and conceptual grounding. Neither 'aura' nor 'spectacle', two categories that fit Monet's works, apply here. Our experience of *Computer* unspools in time, oscillating between the plenitude elicited by the image of nature — the prismatic daydream with which we began — and the terse materiality of the sculpture — which drains us out. Even if momentarily, we let ourselves be transported by the power of the image, from exhausted to succulent, from the pressure of urban life to an all-enveloping experience. A malaise ensues — *Computer*'s horizontal disposition, distributed field and surface distress bring us back to our situated bodies. The elicited experience, as always in Balema, is durational but non-narrative, made of contradicting, reconfigurable registers: mapping blanks, ponds of blue, blurring ginkgo, flowing pixels. 'What makes a mass-produced object yours is your dirt', the artist tells me. 'What draws affect into form is a matter of concern', I hear her saying.[17]

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1 Pamela M. Lee, 'Still Life with Lifestyle', in *The Glen Park Library* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 23.

2 On the 'generic image' in contemporary art, see Bernadette Van Huy, *intent * content * form: six takes on Art Club 2000*. Talk documentation, Artists Space, New York, Thursday 21 January 2021. For an early use of the term, see Samuel T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), esp. Vol. 1, chapter 5.

3 One such rug adorns the artist's New York apartment.

4 The faux terrazzo is based on the floor in a late nineteenth-century painting by the Impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir. By making everyday motifs and patterns integral to their canvases, French 'painters of modern life' defied elite standards of taste. Exchange with the artist, March 2021. See also T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

5 'A waistband as resilient as you and me!' appears in my Instagram feed as I write this essay. *brain damage* dispels such hoodwinking and attests that the opposite is true, while making us wonder — resilient to whose benefit?

6 Formulation 'contains both the emphasis on form — forming, making, poïesis — and the sense of a formula — a protocol, a specific combination of actions, gestures of making, and their potentially meaningful effects'. Griselda Pollock, 'Not Wandering within Diversity', in Isa Genzken, *Works 1973–1983* (Cologne: Walther König, 2020), 31.

7 Jane Livingstone, 'Barry Le Va: Distributional Sculpture', *Artforum* 7, 3 (November 1968): 50–54. Andrea Fraser, 'Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry?', *Grey Room* 22 (Winter 2005): 30–47.

8 Rosalind Krauss, 'The Double Negative. A New Syntax for Sculpture', in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 244.

9 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

10 In so doing, Balema's works direct us to the framework of world-ecology, as theorised by Jason W. Moore and other scholars. For an account of the concepts underpinning world-ecology, see Jason W. Moore, 'Nature in the limits to capital (and vice versa)', *Radical Philosophy* 193 (September–October 2015): 9–19.

11 https://www.1646.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/1646_OlgaBalema_WhatEnters_conversation.pdf. Retrieved 14 March 2021.

12 https://www.artic.edu/artworks/16568/water-lilies. Retrieved 14 March 2021.

13 With the aptly named Unequal Treaties of 1858, Western nations imposed unilateral treaties on the Japanese government under implied threat of invasion. Scholarship on British Japonisme traditionally stops at the level of iconography or composition. For an art-historical reading that centres on the unequal power relations that existed between Japan and the West in the nineteenth century, see K.L.H. Wells, 'The "merely imitative mood": British Japonisme and Imperial Mimesis', *Nineteenth-Century Studies* 27 (2013 [publ. 2017]): 143–66.

14 Read through the framework of world-ecology, Monet's water garden — resulting as it does from new social relations and biological, physical and geological knowledge — is exemplary of how new commodity relationships transformed an ecosystem, all the while activating its epochal power. In the realm of representation, the process is consistent with Wells's definition of 'imperial mimesis', or those 'strategies of acquisitive copying' in Victorian London that 'effectively reproduced Japanese culture and practices as commodities that could be retrieved and acquired … all while entrenching otherness'. Wells, 'British Japonisme and Imperial Mimesis.'

15 https://www.artic.edu/articles/886/the-real-water-lilies-of-giverny. Retrieved 14 March 2021.

16 Romy Golan, 'Oceanic Sensations', in *Muralnomad. The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 7–36.

17 Lauren Berlant & Kathleen Stewart, *The Hundreds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 5.

Reading / Viewing / Listening List

Chantal Akerman, *Hotel Monterey* (1973)

Dave Beech, *On the Hostility to Handicraft, Aesthetic Labour and the Politics of Work in Art* (Brill, 2020)

T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death* (Yale University Press, 2008)

Alice Coltrane, *Journey in Satchinanda* (Impulse, 1971)

Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema* (Tuumba Press, 2005)

ELpH vs. Coil, *Worship the Glitch* (Eskaton, 1995)

Michel Houellebecq, *Possibility of an Island* (Knopf, 2005)

Shigemi Inaga, *Impressionist Aesthetics and Japanese Aesthetics: around A Controversy and about its Historical Meaning as An Example of Creative Misunderstanding* [sic] (Kyoto Conference on Japanese Studies, 1994)

Melt Banana, *Cell-Scape* (A-Zap, 2003)

Peter Nowalk, *How to Get Away with Murder* (Disney-ABC Domestic Television, 2014-2020)

Griselda Pollock, 'Not Wandering within Diversity' in Simon Baier, Jutta Koether, and Griselda Pollock, *Isa Genzken, Works from 1973 — 1983* (Koenig Books, 2021)

Michael Schur, *The Good Place* (NBC Universal Television Distribution, 2016 — 2020)

Biography

Olga Balema (b. Lviv, Ukraine 1984) lives and works in New York. She received her MFA in New Genres from the University of California, Los Angeles (2009), her BFA in sculpture from the University of Iowa (2006), attended the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (2016) and was a resident at the prestigious Skowhegan School of Art and Design, Maine (2010). Balema's solo exhibitions include Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles (2017); Swiss Institute, New York (2016); and Kunstverein Nurnberg, Nurnberg (2015). She has participated in national and international group exhibitions including The Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2019); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2018); Kunstmuseum St Gallen (2018); The Baltic Triennial 13, Vilnius (2018); High Art, Paris (2017); Croy Nielsen, Vienna (2017); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2016); Surround Sound Triennial, New Museum, New York (2015). Balema is the 2017 recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant.

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‘Bach’s organ chorale preludes are as much an expression of skeletal fingers pressing down on ivory keys and releasing air through pipes as they are melodic evocations of prayer.’
Nathaniel Dorsky

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