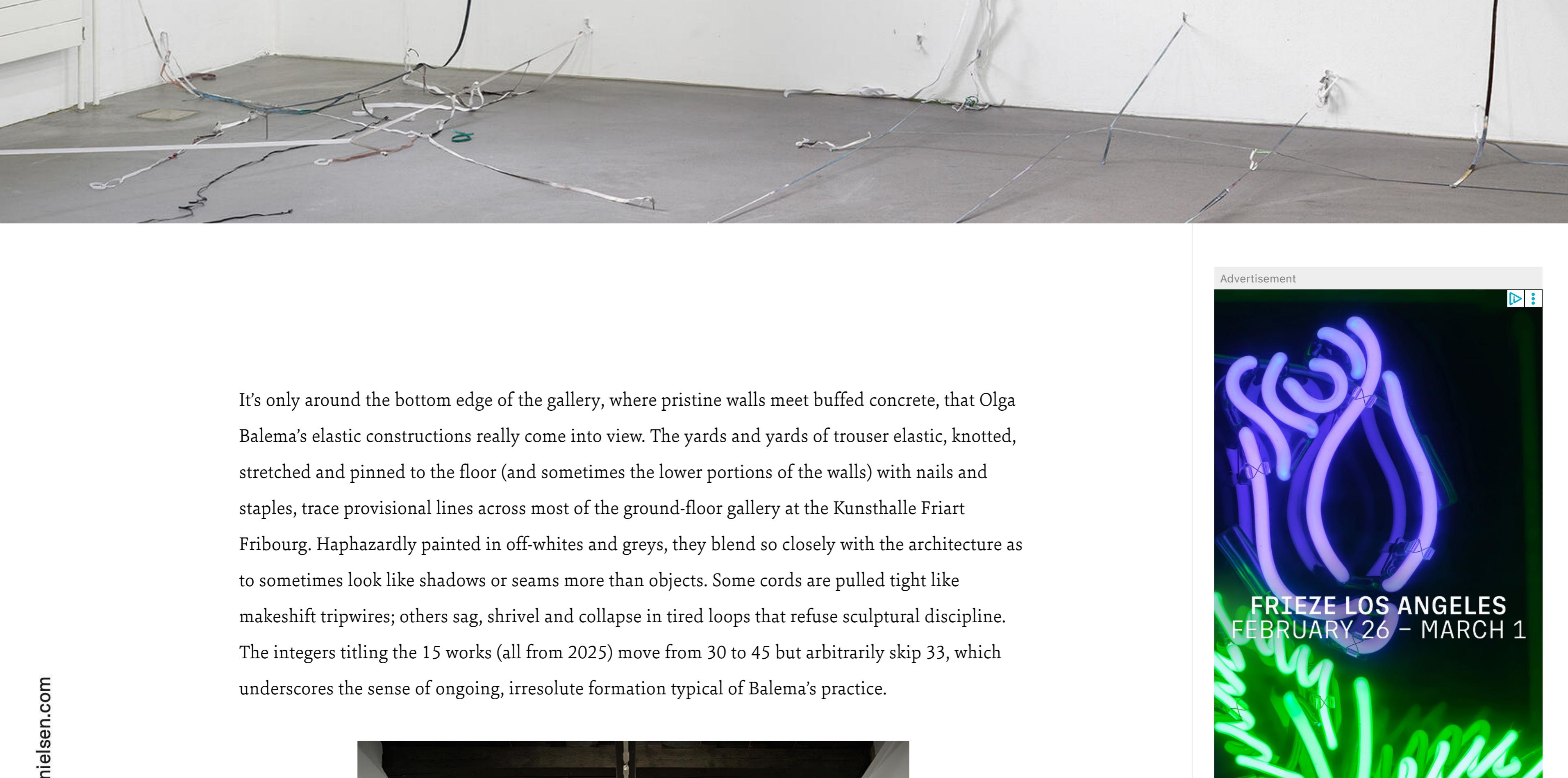


Olga Balema's Faulty Equations

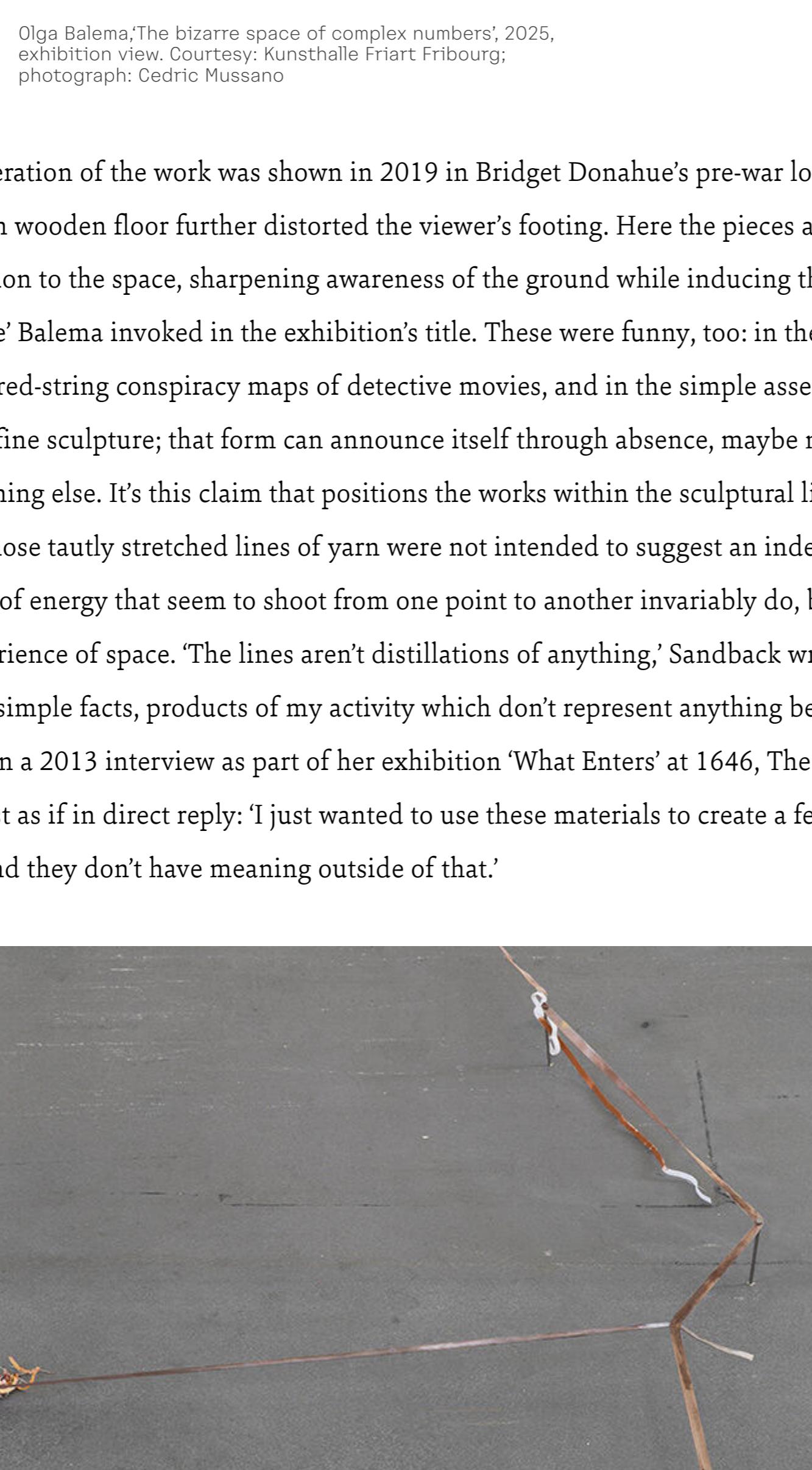
In an exhibition of floor-bound sculptures at the Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg, the artist tests the limits of duration, contingency and collapse



BY MARIANA FERNÁNDEZ IN PROFILES | 05 DEC 25

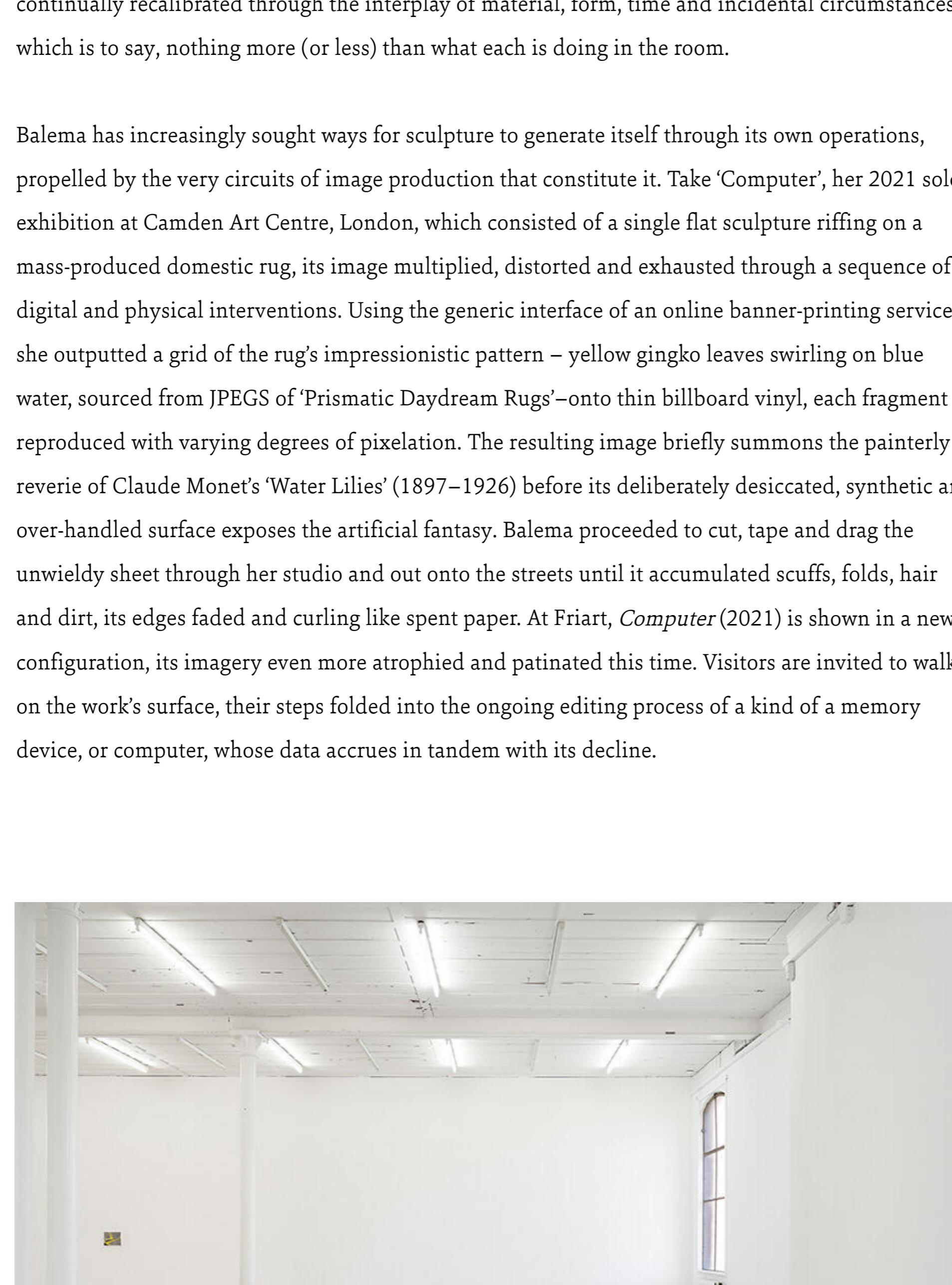


It's only around the bottom edge of the gallery, where pristine walls meet buffed concrete, that Olga Balema's elastic constructions really come into view. The yards and yards of trouser elastic, knotted, stretched and pinned to the floor (and sometimes the lower portions of the walls) with nails and staples, trace provisional lines across most of the ground-floor gallery at the Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg. Haphazardly painted in off-whites and greys, they blend so closely with the architecture as to sometimes look like shadows or seams more than objects. Some cords are pulled tight like makeshift tripwires; others sag, shrivel and collapse in tired loops that refuse sculptural discipline. The integers titling the 15 works (all from 2025) move from 30 to 45 but arbitrarily skip 33, which underscores the sense of ongoing, irresolute formation typical of Balema's practice.



Olga Balema, 'The bizarre space of complex numbers', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg; photograph: Cedric Mussano

A previous iteration of the work was shown in 2019 in Bridget Donahue's pre-war loft on the Bowery, whose uneven wooden floor further distorted the viewer's footing. Here the pieces also warped viewers' relation to the space, sharpening awareness of the ground while inducing the perceptual 'brain damage' Balema invoked in the exhibition's title. These were funny, too: in their faint echo of the jumbled, red-string conspiracy maps of detective movies, and in the simple assertion that line is enough to define sculpture; that form can announce itself through absence, maybe more than through anything else. It's this claim that positions the works within the sculptural lineage of Fred Sandback, whose tautly stretched lines of yarn were not intended to suggest an independent entity, as the planes of energy that seem to shoot from one point to another invariably do, but to mould the viewer's experience of space. 'The lines aren't distillations of anything,' Sandback wrote in his notes in 1975, 'but simple facts, products of my activity which don't represent anything beyond themselves.' In a 2013 interview as part of her exhibition 'What Enters' at 1646, The Hague, Balema sounds almost as if in direct reply: 'I just wanted to use these materials to create a feeling of severe physicality and they don't have meaning outside of that.'



Olga Balema, 'The bizarre space of complex numbers', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg; photograph: Cedric Mussano

In November, a few days after she landed in Switzerland, Balema and I spoke on the phone. She was preparing to install – which here meant reconfigure – existing works on-site for her solo exhibition at Friart, 'The bizarre space of complex numbers'. For an artist whose works have often embraced a kind of cannibalistic permeability of form, the Friart show is surprising in its sustained inquiry into her own sculptures' internal logic, temporality and potential for repetition. The exhibition's title evokes the mathematical field in which real and imaginary values coexist, expanding a single number line into a two-dimensional plane capable of stretching, shrinking and rotating. The three bodies of work on view in Fribourg operate within a similarly mutable geometry, where meaning is continually recalibrated through the interplay of material, form, time and incidental circumstances – which is to say, nothing more (or less) than what each is doing in the room.

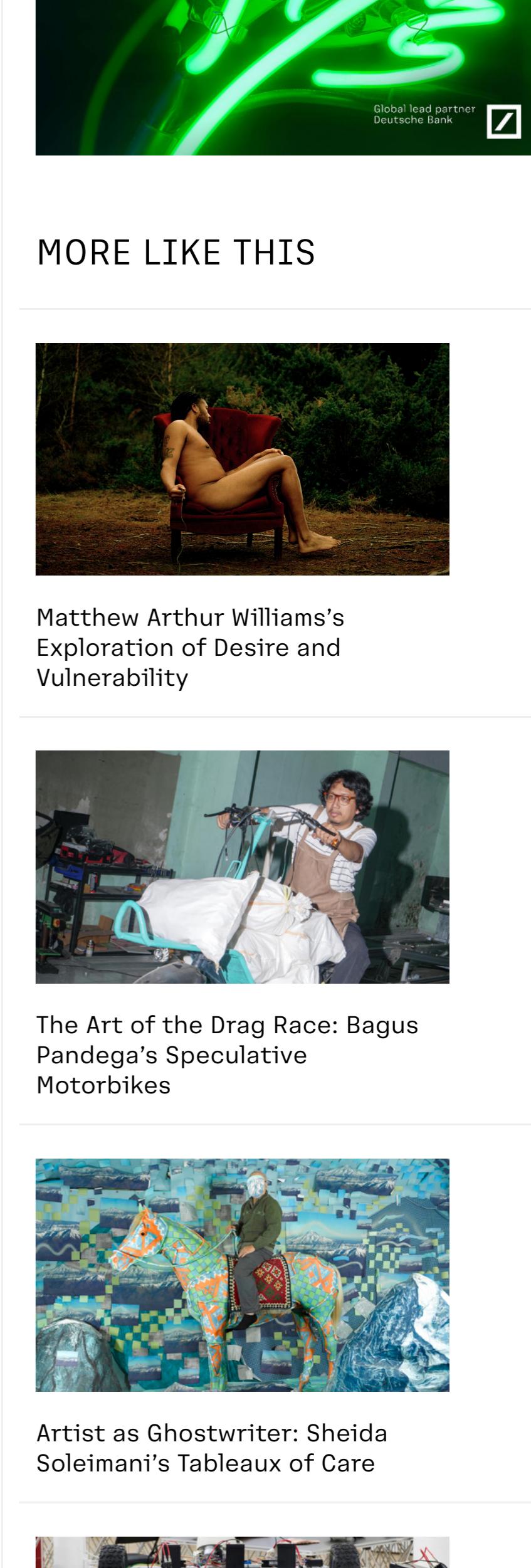
Balema has increasingly sought ways for sculpture to generate itself through its own operations, propelled by the very circuits of image production that constitute it. Take 'Computer', her 2021 solo exhibition at Camden Art Centre, London, which consisted of a single flat sculpture riffing on a mass-produced domestic rug, its image multiplied, distorted and exhausted through a sequence of digital and physical interventions. Using the generic interface of an online banner-printing service, she outputted a grid of the rug's impressionistic pattern – yellow ginkgo leaves swirling on blue water, sourced from JPEGs of 'Prismatic Daydream Rugs' – onto thin billboard vinyl, each fragment reproduced with varying degrees of pixelation. The resulting image briefly summons the painterly reverie of Claude Monet's 'Water Lilies' (1897–1926) before its deliberately desiccated, synthetic and over-handled surface exposes the artificial fantasy. Balema proceeded to cut, tape and drag the unwieldy sheet through her studio and out onto the streets until it accumulated scuffs, folds, hair and dirt, its edges faded and curling like spent paper. At Friart, *Computer* (2021) is shown in a new configuration, its imagery even more atrophied and patinated this time. Visitors are invited to walk on the work's surface, their steps folded into the ongoing editing process of a kind of a memory device, or computer, whose data accrues in tandem with its decline.

Courtesy: Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg; photograph: Cedric Mussano

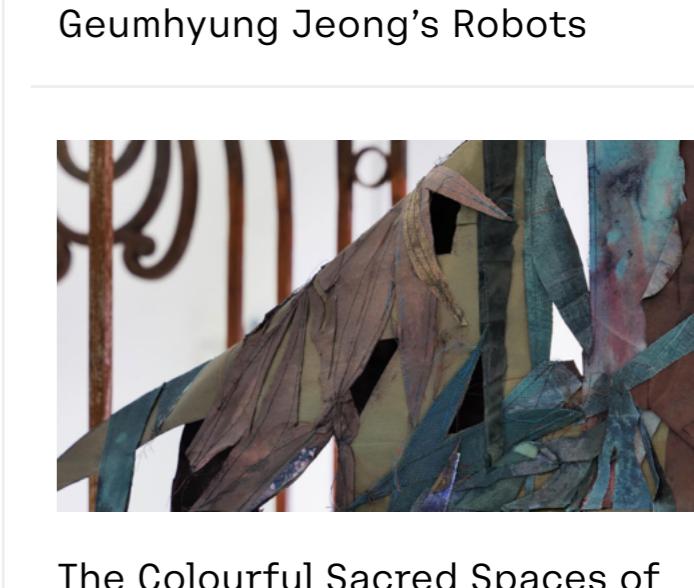
Her 'Formulas' works (2022) are floor sculptures composed of fragments of polyurethane foam pieced into tile-like configurations with dyed latex, which functions as the glue that tenuously holds each work together while accentuating its individual pieces. The result is a sculptural syntax that reconciles brokenness and cohesion, suggesting that form might briefly cohere through the forces that threaten to undo it. A formula, after all, is a protocol, not an equation – a specific combination of actions and their potentially meaningful effects. The gestures of making – across 'The bizarre space of complex numbers' – amount to a series of formulas that test the potential and changeable nature of things in a system that values absolutes. In Balema's web of relations, where everything is internally and externally contingent, the question is what can hold together and for how long. The sculptures' shards and glitches.

Olga Balema, 'The bizarre space of complex numbers', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg; photograph: Cedric Mussano

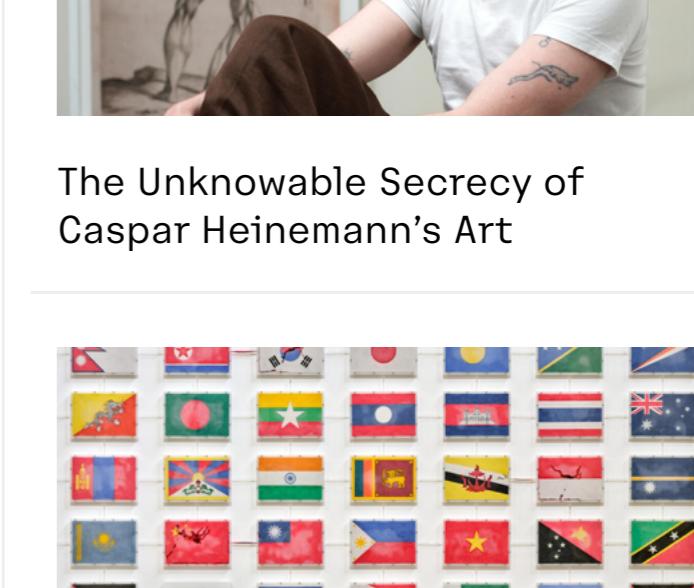
Mariana Fernández is a writer and curator based in New York, USA.



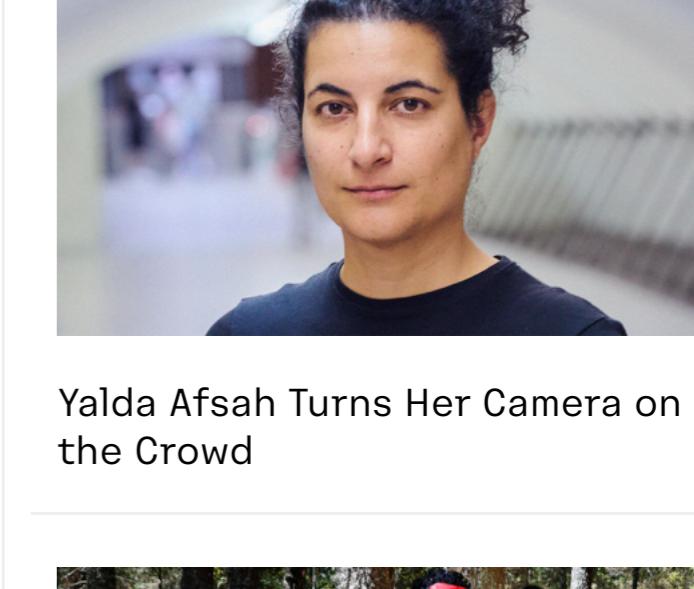
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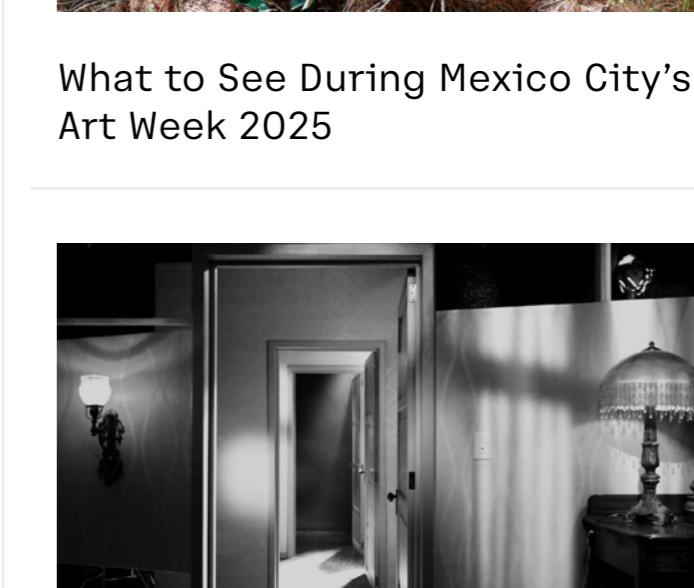
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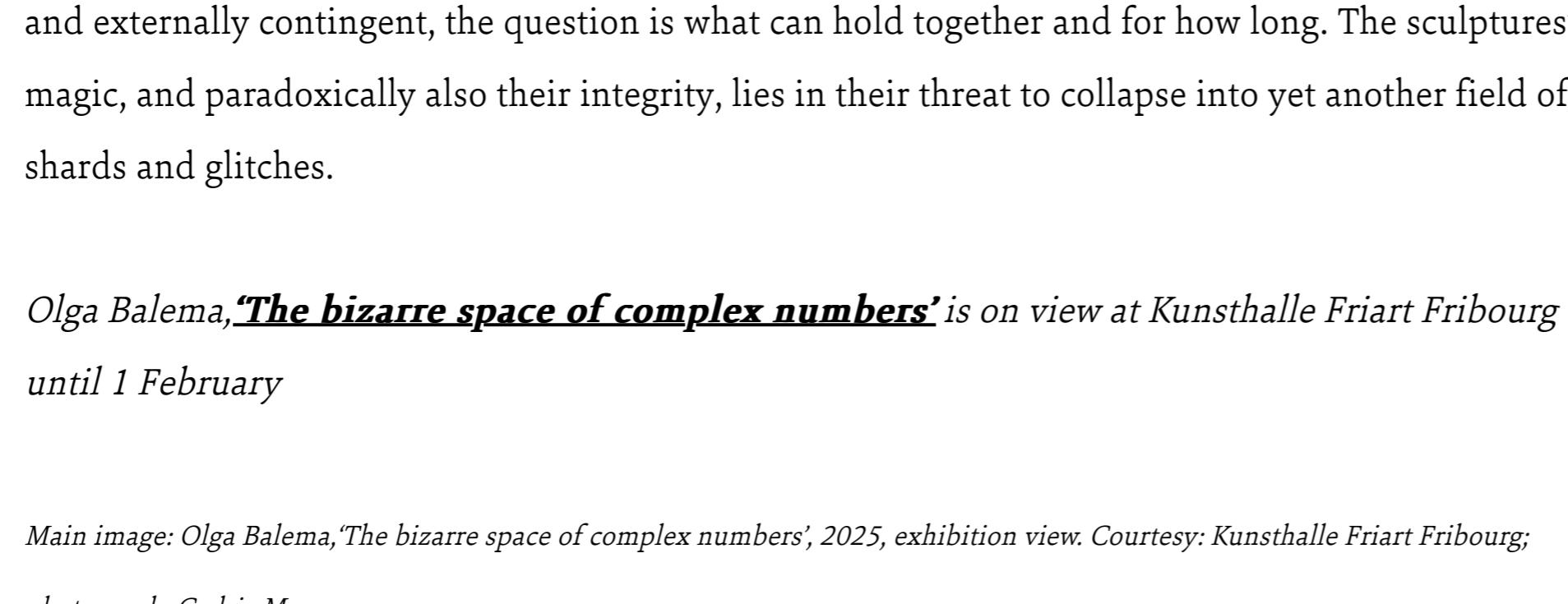
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Courtesy: Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg; photograph: Cedric Mussano

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