TAL STERNGAST

STEPHANIE STEIN – MARE'S NEST

Shortly after encountering the sculptor Auguste Rodin in Paris, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in the summer of 1903 to his friend Lou Andreas-Salomé: "Somehow I too must manage to make things; written, not plastic things,—realities that proceed from handwork."[1] Rilke struggled to use language as the sculptor he admired used clay, plaster, bronze, or marble. How could he build objects out of words? To her anxious friend Andreas-Salomé replied: "Because words do not build like stones."[2]

What Rilke defines in his reply to his friend as "incompatibility of two artistic worlds" remains as tension in the poet's will to carve things out of language, to come up with a new kind of poem that through inseeing ("einsehen", a word he invented) takes into account the object's point of view. The poem itself would not describe the object but rather enact it.

This unresolved tension between language, poetry and matter, and the urge to work in contrary to a medium's nature and against its materiality, comes to mind when walking through Stephanie Stein's installation MARE'S NEST. Could a stone be made of words after all?

Stein's sculptures fluctuate between an incarnation of an imprint in matter (like Joseph Beuys's) and image-objects: a projection upon matter or casting matter according to a given image (after Marcel Duchamp, all Pop Art and what followed it).

The accurately formed objects, or rather things, seemingly abstract, are arranged among themselves in an interrelated syntax. Like a fragmented body in which each fragment has a life of its own.

Nineteen hand-blown glass needles protrude horizontally from the gallery wall, facing visitors as they enter *HOT COLD*, 2025. A field of drops frozen in midair, suspended horizontally against gravity. Each is no longer than fifty centimeters, thin with spiky tips that penetrate the space and pierce the air.

At first glance, penetration, sharpness and transparency seem to be contradictory attributes. Wonder and attraction coincide with cautiousness, aversion contends awe. But we know that a needle can prick and that glass can cut; glass is also used to make surgical scalpels and ultra-thin blades. What are we to make of these conflicted sensations? Stein mentions Paul Éluard's lines from the poem Mania: "After years of wisdom / During which the world was as transparent / As a needle," a surrealist idiom of immediacy and pureness.

But perhaps these needles are elongated glass tears? In her previous exhibition *RUN RUN RUN* at the Kunstraum München in 2024, Stein showed *CONTINUOUS INTEREST*, 2024, seventeen glass tear-like needles hanging from the ceiling, their drop like butts held by wire.

1)
Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1892–1910, translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton. New York (1945), p. 124–125.

2)
Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *A Love Story in Letters*, translated by Edward Snow, New York (2008), p. 392.

In her studio, one such needle hangs by the window, acting as a prism through which light passes. A tear through which the world is seen, like a window blurred with emotion. "It's funny / How nothing seems clear, / When you're looking through a tear," Aretha Franklin sings. "When love leaves and breaks your heart / Your dreams simply fall apart / You see a world sad and blue / So unfamiliar to you" (*Looking Through a Tear*, 1963). Then again, isn't a tear through which we see the world also a definition of an image?

Both front and back walls of the gallery are made of glass, making the installation visible from the outside. Glass — material and emblem at the same time, both a transparent surface and a barrier, prefigured to a great degree, at least since Duchamp's Large Glass, the relations between the viewer and the modern work of art. Conceptually, one can experience the artwork only through a wall of glass that separates, or introduces a distance between artist and artwork, artwork and viewer. Glass cases, however, are meaningfully absent from two variations of "vitrines" that stand side by side in the middle of the back room, *Untitled (FF),* 2025. Their steel skeleton is coated with graphite. Instead of the heavy glazed case of a vitrine there is a rectangular frame, its proportion recalls a cabinet or a grave. The long, spindly legs are reminiscent of an animal. These dysfunctional silhouettes of a display device are adorned on their rims with the words "FEEL" and "FREE" in bold letters: They almost resemble prison bars, suggesting the opposite of their literal meaning. Beuys's vitrines, which Stein refers to, were often exhibited as an ensemble and made transformative use of the authoritative structure and methodology of the anthropological museum. In his vitrines, which he often constructed especially for his exhibitions, he presented small-scale sculptures, multiples, and residues-relics. His vitrines acted as a double of the museal vitrine that subverts the museum's encyclopedic display order and serves rather as a threshold that transforms the objects presented inside.

And then, there is a profile of a girl, *Where's West* (2025), printed and framed. She is photographed in a first communion outfit. A rite of passage between childhood and adulthood, between innocence and seduction, her head is leaning forward, her black and white smile exposes teeth, it exposes a dark hole. The profile of the girl is the only human figure in the installation. Its photographic patina brings to mind Roland Barthes: "For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life-Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print."[3]

3)
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York (1981), Part 1, p. 92.

A kind of “dust edge” is applied to the walls of the gallery’s front room — as if something is growing from the floor upwards. In Nordic, Germanic, and Slavic folklore, a mare is a malevolent creature that is often female. It visits people while they sleep and summons nightmares. It can shift smoothly between realms — fable and psyche, human and animal, natural and super-natural, and magic and physical pain. What could her nest be? A home? A trap? An illusion?

A stack of give away posters of Owen Gump’s work, *The iCloud (Apple Inc. Data Center), Storey County, Nevada*, 2019, on the floor, convey a social and historical aspect to this constellation. The black and white photograph shows a desert landscape at night. A fortress-like building which is surrounded with lights. The invasive, indifferent nature of this secured massive data center in the Nevada desert is as brutal as it is mysterious.

Language in Stein’s work is not merely conceptual or immaterial. It is analytic, systemic and elegiac, personal. Her work is post-minimalism that is neither post nor minimalist. The works in the exhibition flicker between their abstract state, emotional intensity, and narrative implications. They stir sensation to evoke thought. Subjectivity exceeds itself into form.

Owen Gump, *The iCloud (Apple, Inc. Data Center), Storey County, Nevada,* 2019