Subtle gray gradations—dove, ash, lead, silver, pewter—tinged with brown or blue, marked by wooden molds, speckled and streaked with uneven sediment, pockmarked with air pockets: Isa Genzken’s concrete sculptures of 1986–90 exploit the irregularities of the material, further exacerbating its grittiness with raw edges and uneven horizontal breaks. Titles like Zimmer, Saal, Halle, Kirche, Hochhaus, Korridor, Welle, and Bühne demonstrate that Genzken’s reference points are clearly architectural, though the roughly model-scaled works seldom mimic the morphology of specific architectural typologies. With the exception of a few early examples, the rectilinear structures in Genzken’s works are never sealed or solid but instead roofless walls that delineate space. Breaks in the outer walls reveal dark corridors and niches partially lit by slanting rays that snag on concrete ridges. The pieces are lifted on their bases to eye level, and the viewer’s wandering gaze navigates those corridors and occasionally encounters corners that cannot be turned. The pleasures of parallax are economically produced, as a walk around the sculpture opens up new lines of sight previously unmappable.

Much like the different pourings of cement that make up the structures, or like their compositional compounds, layers of often conflicting references settle and aggregate in these concrete sculptures. The hulking masses conjure derelict and dimly lit housing projects and bombed-out buildings. (Genzken does not shy from explicit content or associative properties.1) She one-ups her Minimalist forebears, whose polished metal cubes and tiles look designed and hermetically sealed

*  My thanks to Hal Foster and Stanley Allen, who occasioned this paper, and to Brigid Doherty, Kate Nesin, and Daniel Bosch for their insightful commentary.

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compared to her construction-site frankness.) Simultaneously, the concrete works rise like pseudoromantic ruins, gaping structures that speak eloquently of a grandeur that has succumbed to the ravages of nature and time. For Robert Morris, the ruin straddled the sculptural and the architectural, a condition of liminality that aptly describes Genzken’s works, the scale of which belies their palpable presence. Morris writes, “But whether the gigantic voids of the Baths of Caracalla or the tight chambers and varying levels of Mesa Verde, such places occupy a zone that is neither strictly a collection of objects nor an architectural space.”

Genzken’s concrete works exert a spatial power akin to architecture rather than to scaled models (as such, they act less like miniatures than metonyms for architectural presence). This is true even as they maintain sculptural intimacy, upheld, so to speak, by her attention to their attenuated steel pedestals, which raise the sculptures to eye level.

Additional conflicting meanings inhere in the sculptures’ material. Sigfried Giedion’s nearly alchemical view of concrete’s possibilities speaks to its original promise:

> From slender iron rods, cement, sand, and gravel, from an “aggregate body,” vast building complexes can suddenly crystallize into a single stone monolith that like no previously known natural material is able to resist fire and a maximum load. This is accomplished because the laboratory intelligently exploits the properties of these almost worthless materials and through their combination increases their separate capacities many times over.

But even as concrete evokes early and mid-twentieth-century utopian aspirations for air- and light-filled spaces, and even as Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles compellingly reimagined flexible mass housing in undisguised concrete, we have now come to know it better for its degraded manifestation in postwar low-income housing the world over. The more immediate referent in postwar Germany would be the ubiquitous prefabricated concrete slab structures built beginning in the 1960s throughout the German Democratic Republic. Once embodiments of socialist ideals of progressive housing, the large developments of GDR prefab apartments, nicknamed die Platte [the slab], were notorious after the fall of the Berlin Wall for their lack of infrastructure. So if Genzken’s sculptures cite concrete’s utopian promise, their bulky masses aspiring to lightness on thin legs, they simultaneously bring home its failure to make good on that promise. Yet far from any simple melancholic reflection of failure, Genzken’s project keeps the original optimism intact and in play. Utopianism in her work cannot be pried apart from its perversion. This is clear in the importance to Genzken of Joseph Beuys, for whom an expanded notion of sculpture as social activism was bound up with a hyperinvestment of his self with shamanistic power. The steel bases of Genzken’s concrete sculptures pay homage to Beuys’s vitrines, even as her choice of concrete stoically refuses any of the properties suggestive of transformation and energy transfer that Beuys favored (fat, felt, and beeswax).

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh writes that Genzken’s sculptural work in concrete “insists conspicuously and consistently on addressing the collective conditions of existing in architecture.” She shows these collective conditions to be deeply conflicted. In Genzken’s works the same stony face of concrete reads as Kantian sublimity, Brutalist je-m’en-foutisme, Corbusian harmony and airiness, GDR drab, and Giedion-esque technological optimism. The suggestive power of Genzken’s sculptural practice is precisely a richness of reference irreducible to a single position. Furthermore, hers is an exploration of those positions and possibilities active in the present—as legacies to be reckoned with, tested against one another, deployed, or transformed. More specifically, in the case of the concrete series and the New Buildings for Berlin, the present to be explored would be Germany’s in the decades leading up to and after reunification.

Like the GDR Platte, the Berlin Wall—first a literal barrier and then differently insurmountable “wall in the mind” post-1989—can be seen as an unavoidable point of reference for Genzken’s concrete works, executed between 1986 and 1990. The works are by no means tediously editorial or merely topical, however, but complicated by myriad references and positions and by their sculptural integrity. In their fissured and ruined states, Genzken’s sculptures suggest a rupture

of circumscribed space and a breakdown of inside and outside, interior and exterior. The emptiness emphatically articulated by the structures and their brutal and unyielding permanence nevertheless speaks poignantly about “existing in architecture,” as Buchloh put it, and specifically that formidable piece of architecture that was the Berlin Wall.

Rapidly removed, auctioned, or chipped into memento-ready chunks, little was left of the wall by 1991. In its absence a large swath of no-man’s-land cut through the center of the city from the Brandenburg Gate to Potsdamer Platz, Leipziger Platz, and beyond. But the voids, about which Andreas Huyssen has eloquently written, were destined to be patched in a rushed and uncoordinated manner, with corporate entities and private developers vying for spots in the new Weltstadt. Potsdamer Platz, a primary node of activity until it was devastated in World War II, was transformed from a thriving center to a barren periphery by the erection of the Berlin Wall. The fall of the wall prompted frantic efforts to reinstate Potsdamer Platz as the symbolic center of Berlin. Even in the months before the fall of the wall, the city government of Berlin negotiated the sale of fifteen acres of Potsdamer Platz to Daimler-Benz at a fraction of their market value. The controversial sale was finalized in 1990 and site work began in 1992 in accordance with Renzo Piano’s prizewinning scheme. Only around 1995 were structures seen above ground.7 The Daimler-Benz building was finished in 1998 and the Sony headquarters in 2000, with still other buildings in progress over the next few years. Friedrichstadt Passagen, Checkpoint Charlie, and Alexanderplatz were also being reenvisioned as commercial and corporate centers in these years. With considerable leeway in regard to design and materials, the first of these, Friedrichstadt Passagen, was built according to the envelope dictated by berlinische Architektur, a policy of conservative and illusory historicism upheld by the Senate Building Director, Hans Stimmann. Francesca Rogier summarizes the policy thus:

*Berlinische Architektur*, an allusion to classical convention, is a homogenization of Prussian tradition blended with the severe architecture of the Third Reich. . . . *Berlinische Architektur* is, in practice, a rudimentary formula of closed, squat volumes with cornice lines at twenty-two meters and roofs no higher than thirty meters; sober punched-window facades, restrained ornament if any, and preferably drab materials such as stucco or stone.8

Alexanderplatz, with little surviving “historic fabric,” was exempted from these regulations. (Its more recent history as the rebuilt center of East Berlin was all too readily dismissed.) Against the bitter protest of community groups, big-business

8. Ibid., p. 48.
representatives dominating the Alexanderplatz jury rallied behind Hans Kollhoff and Helga Timmerman’s winning scheme, which proposed the construction of thirteen high-rises and garnered the nickname “Little Manhattan.”

Critics have described the postwall refashioning of Berlin’s image, with faux-historicism on the one hand and cookie-cutter globalism on the other, as a making of a theme park, media city, and Schaustelle [site of viewing and spectacle]; as a sign of willed ignorance of Germany’s Weimar-era legacy of advanced architecture by figures like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Bruno Taut; as a troubled reckoning with the Nazi past; and as a stale debate between berlinische Architektur and kritische Rekonstruktion—stale because both positions ultimately reduce to a fictionalized notion of a European city of uniform building structures. It is against this backdrop of architecture as image and of reconstruction as theater that we must see Genzken’s series New Buildings for Berlin, begun in 2001 and continued in 2002 and 2004. Rectangular strips of jewel-toned, clear, and textured glass, eighty centimeters high, lean one against another like Richard Serra prop pieces made luminous (if precarious) skyscrapers, or like streamlined descendents of Vladimir Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International (1919). But are these Serras made luminous or simply Serra “lite”? After all, Serra’s meticulous architectonics of gravity and weight hold hefty slabs and plates in perfect suspension—and we feel this tension. Genzken’s New Buildings, on the other hand, are held together with sticky tape and silicon. (She asks us to move, in other words,

10. Ibid., p. 48.
from heavy industry’s mills to the organized rows of Home Depot—or of Bauhaus, by which I mean Germany’s version of DIY heaven.) Genzken pays homage even as she travesties Serra’s work, taking to task the hypermasculine tendencies and blue-collar pretensions of some of the rhetoric surrounding it. This element of travesty is characteristic of many of Genzken’s works: Tatlin’s Corner Reliefs made flaccid, jangling mobiles of mangled cake pans, rakes, and other household wares, for instance. Or Genzken’s Social Facades of 2002, compositions on panel of mirror foil in saturated colors and disco-ready finishes, which suggest gleeful perversions and amped-up iterations of abstraction’s opticality. Gridded foil taunts the stoic modernist grid; the purported nonreferentiality of geometric abstraction gives way to glittering facades; and sublime uplift is trumped by the specular ecstasy of the dance hall and club culture. Consider also Genzken’s public sculpture for Leipzig, Rose—an eight-meter-tall stainless-steel, aluminum, and lacquer rose, which could be read as a kitschy, banal, and ludicrous literalization of Beuysian utopianism à la Rose for Direct Democracy, in which a fresh bloom in a graduated cylinder enlivened each of the one hundred days of Documenta 5 in 1972. Beuys writes, “Bud and bloom are in fact green leaves transformed. So in relation to the leaves and the stem the bloom is a revolution, although it grows through organic transformation and evolution.” The revolution is arrested in Genzken’s Rose, a steely column memorializing the loss of transformative potential, a public punch line to Beuys’s outsized romanticism. With sculptural intelligence and keen wit, Genzken balances her objects on the line between homage and travesty—a line she shows to be remarkably fine.

In the 2006 Phaidon monograph on Genzken, the artist included Charles Baudelaire’s prose poem “The Bad Glazier,” from his collection Petits poèmes en prose, alongside reproductions of 2004 versions of New Buildings for Berlin. The poem begins, “There exist characters, purely contemplative and completely unsuited for action, who, however, influenced by a mysterious and unknown impulse, sometimes act with a speed of which they would not have believed themselves capable.” The narrator proceeds to relate instances of “harmless dreamers” “abruptly hurled into action by an irresistible force,” finding an “excess of courage for executing the most absurd and often even the most dangerous acts.” He ends by retelling his own brush with demonic inspiration. Flinging open his window to the grimy Parisian air, he hears the discordant cry of a glazier hawking his wares. “Seized by a hatred for this pitiful man as sudden as it was despotic,” the narrator calls the glazier up to his room, up seven flights of narrow stairs. Examining the fragile wares, the narrator cries in disbelief, “What? You have no colored panes?

No pink panes, no red, no blue, no magic panes, no panes of paradise? You are shameless! You dare walk through poor neighborhoods, and you don’t even have panes which make life beautiful!” Having wrestled his wares back onto the street, the disgruntled glazier is knocked on his back by a falling flowerpot, his precious cargo crushed. The narrator, perpetrator of senseless violence, recalls, “drunk with my madness, I shouted at him furiously, ‘Make life beautiful! Make life beautiful!’” Whether or not Baudelaire’s poem directly proposed the terms for *New Buildings for Berlin*, it describes an aesthetic attitude critical for understanding Genzken’s work, and particularly its development into the twenty-first century. Baudelaire deftly illustrates that the call for beauty and for life’s betterment is implicated in violence, irrationality, and intoxication [*ivresse*]; that the dystopian inheres in its more idealistic opposite; and that advocacy may erupt in antagonism.

Baudelaire describes the clamor of the glazier’s crushed glass as “the brilliant sound of a crystal palace smashed by lightning,” a likely reference to the Crystal Palace built for the 1851 London exhibition. Dolf Oehler extends the link to the rapid changes to the Parisian urban fabric brought about by Baron Haussmann’s impetus to modernize, sanitize, and make rational the medieval city. For my part, I relate the wholesale reconfiguration of Baudelaire’s Paris to the reenvisioned *Stadtbild* of Genzken’s Berlin. In the context of the Friedrichstadt Passagen development, with its strictures of false historicism, Genzken’s glass towers raise the specter of Mies’s 1921 competition entry for Berlin’s first skyscraper,

also to be built on Friedrichstrasse. Mies’s crystalline structure, with its expressionist, skyward thrust, bespoke a utopian belief in transparency brought about by technology: steel construction would free the glass walls from their load-bearing function. Mies’s fascination with “the rich interplay of light reflections” is mirrored in the shifting perspectives offered to the ambulatory viewer of Genzken’s *New Buildings*, which additionally offer the delights of shifting colors and texture’s subtle distortions. Genzken could be said to give us a taste of glass architecture as figured in Paul Scheerbart’s ecstatic vision of “the Earth clad . . . in jewelry of brilliants and enamel.”

14 Writing in the 1910s, Scheerbart imagined the opening out of living spaces through the introduction of glass architecture that lets the sunlight and the light of the moon and stars into our rooms . . . simultaneously through the greatest possible number of walls that are made entirely of glass—colored glass. The new environment that we shall thereby create must bring with it a new culture. . . . Then we shall have a paradise on Earth and would not need to gaze longingly at the paradise in the sky.15

Does this call for cultural change through the liberating effects of colored glass remind us of Baudelaire’s narrator, who demands that the glazier remake the world in rose-tinted lenses? (“No colored panes . . . no magic panes, no panes of paradise?” he asks.) Deliberate irrationality and perversion quickly become nastiness; soon prismatic hopes shatter into shards. In Genzken’s work, too, we begin to wonder if the glittering facets of color circumscribe emptiness. For even as her kaleidoscopic towers invoke glass architecture’s utopian promises, they reflect the evacuation of Miesian optimism and rigor from the ubiquitous curtain walls of the anonymous corporate structures such as those rising rapidly at Alexanderplatz and elsewhere in the city. Colin Rowe diagnosed commercial architects’ deployment of the curtain wall as the creation of “a suitable veneer for the corporate activities of ‘enlightened’ capitalism.”16 Taking Genzken’s title literally, for a moment, might we suspect that her “buildings” offer us pure veneer, empty of function or program? If architect Dagmar Richter perceives “that Berlin will become the first state-organized media city of surface,” surpassing even “our expectations of Las Vegas, Disney, and City Walk,” do Genzken’s glass facades reflect the apotheosis of image culture, of surface pure and simple?17 Does Scheerbart’s vision of culture reconfigured by glass architecture morph into the nightmare of culture dulled by flickering lights and image saturation? Does Genzken show glass to be a cut-rate substitute for an authentic “jewelry of brilliants”? Or, alternatively, could she be seen to pointedly literalize the recent trend among star architects to

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15. Ibid.
wed literal and phenomenological transparency into sculptural preciousness, as diagnosed by Hal Foster?

Sometimes . . . skins and scrims only dazzle or confuse, and the architecture becomes an illuminated sculpture, a radiant jewel. It can be beautiful, but it can also be spectacular in the negative sense used by Guy Debord—a kind of commodity fetish on a grand scale, a mysterious object whose production is mystified.¹⁸

Of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin wrote, “To interrupt the course of the world—this is Baudelaire’s deepest wish. . . . From this wish sprang his violence, his impatience and his anger. From it too sprang the ever renewed attempts to strike at the heart of the world, or to sing it to sleep.”¹⁹ Not prone to lullabies, Genzken’s impulse to burst the glass bubble of our complacency cannot be extricated from an urge to effect change. However, to “strike at the heart of the world” is an ambivalent motion that can either still the life-sustaining organ or induce it to beat again. The dialectical tension between destruction and construction propels effective action—“to see, to know, to tempt fate,” as Baudelaire’s speaker says—while the alternative is ineffectual ennui.²⁰ Richard Burton articulates the coexistence of opposing forces in Baudelaire’s poems thus:

The appalling fascination of “Le Mauvais Vitrier” and “Une mort her- ique” lies in their insinuation that creation and destruction, the urge to bind, combine, and unite and the counter-urge to break, draw ultimately from the same reservoir of energy. . . . For Baudelaire, it cannot be stressed too often, is both the vitrier and his tormentor . . . sado-masochistically united in their very dividedness and opposition, a congeries of antagonistic urges whose truly explosive conflicts are acted out on and beneath the textual surface of the Petits poèmes en prose.²¹

If Genzken’s sculptures in concrete and glass hold the two poles in balance, or at least refuse to tip her hand, it is partially due to their restrained visual vocabulary and limited materials. Substantial and conflicting stakes play themselves out on the gritty surface of concrete and across the glossy planes of glass, but the forms are more or less articulations of post-Minimalist and architectural structures. Even the object-pedestal distinction of traditional sculpture is clearly maintained.

For those viewers most familiar with Genzken’s early series in concrete and glass (as well as her other sculptures with clearly architectural morphologies, such as the series of windows and paravents of the early to mid-1990s or the series of

slender, clad columns succeeding them) the radical breakdown of sculptural restraint, if not of sculptural control, embodied by her suite of assemblages collectively titled *Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death*, begun in 2003, comes as something of a shock. The antinomies economically alluded to and evoked in the earlier structures now rupture the surface and wage full-blown war in the combat zone of the pedestal. The dystopian, destructive, and negative clearly win the day: Genzken gives free rein to the travesty, the comic-grotesque, the diabolical act, and the hysterical outburst.

With *Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death*, post-Minimalist form explodes into the myriad surfaces and shapes offered by consumer culture: action figures, denim jeans, straws, cheap glass goblets, sunflower seeds, plastic flora, boots, and bread. Exuberantly spattered with glossy paint (in blinding white or Day-Glo colors) and topped or wrapped in sheets of mirror foil, these mad constructions defy all rules of compositional harmony, visual cohesion, or sculptural integrity. The architectural is hardly absent, but it has suffered grotesque and hilarious disfigurement. Glass architecture is reduced to glass goblets and vases; soaring arches are mimed (and maimed) by rubber tubing or by a sheet of bent foil, held in place by liberal distribution of tape. (In her gratuitous use of tape, Genzken thumbs her nose at the architectural fetishization of the joint and seam.) The cheapness and tackiness of her materials, too, is a reflection on the architectural context in Germany:

> The awful thing about architecture here is that everything, almost everything, is done in the cheapest construction style, the cheapest. They don’t make sure people use the best materials, they just use what’s cheapest. Just look at Potsdamer Platz, it’s like a piece of scenery!

The new term here is *scenery*, for Genzken’s sculptures are now clearly stagings. In scenes of destruction and deconstruction, armies of tchotchkes play out grisly warfare, both ludicrous and unnerving. A figurine of a goalie guards the mouth of a wine glass containing plastic prisoners. Another figure (friend or foe?) lies splayed on the battlefield of a crumpled brown jacket, spray-painted garish red and white. Discordances in scale and of genre (sleek sci-fi fighters, porcelain ballerinas, clumsy cartoon characters), heightened by seemingly haphazard construction, give the sense that a sadistic child has wreaked havoc on a world of unsuspecting playthings. The diabolic fervor and perverse humor of these works seem to be carried out under the aegis of the same sudden, irrational impulses that incite the idle dreamers of “The Bad Glazier” to action and that drive Baudelaire’s narrator to torment the hapless glazier. He confesses, “More than once I have been victim of such attacks and outbursts, which justify our belief that some malicious Demons slip into us and, without us knowing it, make us carry out

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their most absurd wishes.”

In his letter of June 26, 1860, to Gustave Flaubert, Baudelaire writes, “I realized that I’ve always been obsessed by the impossibility of understanding certain of man’s sudden thoughts or deeds, unless we accept the hypothesis that an evil force, external to man, has intervened.” The diabolic, demonic, and evil as motivating forces in Baudelaire’s work, particularly in *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Paris Spleen*, have been dismissed by Fredric Jameson as the expressions of the “second-rate post-Romantic Baudelaire, the Baudelaire of diabolism and cheap *frisson*, the poet of blasphemy and of a creaking and musty religious machinery that was no more interesting in the mid-nineteenth century than it is today.” Jameson wants, instead, to home in on the postmodern Baudelaire, the one who speaks to his moment of late capitalism and image culture with an affectless euphoria. But if for Jameson, writing in 1985, the diabolic smacks of old wives’ superstitions and symbolist gloom, there is a way in which our present moment, when postmodernism’s endgame of simulacrum has dead-ended, might reach back to the diabolic—a pact with the devil to escape the end times—to find in it strategies for drastic action.

Benjamin seemed to understand the gambit of Baudelaire’s invocation of the diabolic. “Spleen,” he wrote, “is that feeling which corresponds to catastrophe in permanence.” That haunting phrase “catastrophe in permanence” would describe our inheritance from the twentieth century, heightened, renewed, and compounded by the opening bars of the twenty-first century. Genzken has stated that *Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death* responds to the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Genzken was in New York at the time), to America’s political machinations in its aftermath, and to the threat of the Iraq War. Empire and vampire refer to American hegemony by metonymic proxies: the Empire State Building and its “vampiric” counterpart, the Chrysler Building. On the world stage the theater of war plays itself out in encore after encore (featuring frequent set, cast, and costume changes):

The course of history as represented in the concept of catastrophe has no more claim on the attention of the thinking than the kaleidoscope in the hand of a child which, with each turn, collapses everything ordered into new order. The justness of this image is well-founded. The concepts of the rulers have always been the mirror by means of whose image an “order” was established.—This kaleidoscope must be smashed. In a decisive gesture, Genzken slams the kaleidoscope against the sculptural pedestal on which she lets the pieces fall. The mesmerizing subterfuge of mirrors is diffused in the utter banality of mirror foil. In dropping the flowerpot-turned-missile, the narrator of “The Bad Glazier” does his part as well, irreparably shattering the myth of transparency. In “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin describes the poet’s artistic project as a “parrying of shocks” dealt by the city and by existence—one might add to this list those shocks dealt by catastrophe. Benjamin writes, “[Baudelaire’s] shock defense is depicted graphically in an attitude of combat.” Seized by a diabolic paroxysm, the Baudelairean figure takes aim.

At her exhibition at the Vienna Secession in 2006, Genzken expanded on the sculptural idiom initiated in *Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death* and subsequently continued in *Wasserspeier and Angels* and *The American Room*, both from 2004. The untitled 2006 works, effectively installed as a motley group, are for me the culmination of a no-holds-barred, head-on strike against the sculptural form. In terms of shock value, these works offer the most devastating parry. For here—even more so than in *Empire/Vampire*, where the pedestal remained intact and the scenic aspect palpable—Genzken sabotages sculptural integrity, pushing it to its limits. If the earlier series addressed the catastrophe of architecture become theater, war turned deadly play, and world morphed into an aggregate of interchangeable

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27. Ibid.
commodities, these new works turn up the decibel of her commentary with strident effectiveness. Wheelchairs and walkers take the place of the base—how much more succinctly could Genzken convey the crippled state of sculptural practice? Sculpture’s body collapses into the wheelchairs as so many lengths of ribbon, unbuckled belts, and crumpled sheets of fabric and plastic sheeting; sculptural structure is deflated, flaccid, and formless. We are looking at the sorry degradation of sculpture’s meticulous imitation of the fall of drapery. Long a means of implying an underlying form while transforming matter—marble into chiffon, wood into silk—drapery here is a formless heap of coarse ticking and polyester net. For all the seeming lack of restraint, however, these untitled works are remarkably economical sculptural puns: the walkers are armored vehicles that double as complex torture devices as well as rehabilitation aids for the war-wounded. High-tech crutches lean against the wall like rail-thin automatons or
sci-fi firearms. The enlightened human comes in the form of a some-assembly-required torchiere lamp outfitted with stick-figure arms, legs, and head. Infant dolls are shaded by slashed beach-umbrellas—like pint-size Buddhas, wise before their age. Two more dolls slouch over their plastic ponies, mockeries of the heroic genre of equestrian statues that are acute enough to elicit laughter. A figure sports something on its head that looks like Napoleon’s bicorne. They will never make it across the Saint Bernard Pass.

Such a decoding of these untitled works belies their sculptural radicality; aggressive in address, trespassing on all conventions, they are decidedly in excess of comprehension or pithy summary. They distinguish themselves from similar contemporary aggregations that seem studied and caption-ready. Without mythologizing Genzken’s artistic process as spontaneous release or id run amok, however, I assert that Genzken’s works exhibit a deliberate unmooring from tested aesthetic formulas or conventions, the results of which read as ecstatic outburst. The structures—constructions built of destruction, held together by sheer force of will and
exuberant energy—threaten at every moment to splinter into irretrievably disparate elements. These are works on the “brink of psychosis,” as Buchloh usefully diagnoses. For Buchloh, the permanent catastrophe these works address is that of consumer culture and universal equivalence:

To have the self succumb to the totalitarian order of objects brings the sculptor to the brink of psychosis, and Genzken’s new work seems to inhabit that position. However, since total submission to the terror of consumption is indeed the governing stratum of collective object-relations, that psychotic state may well become the only position and practice the sculptor of the future can articulate.29

For both Buchloh’s psychotic and Baudelaire’s splenetic the spasm of inspiration—which physicians perceive as hysterical, the speaker of “The Bad Glazier” tells us—is a tenuously sustained refusal of total submission.30 The “Baudelaire of diabolism and cheap frisson,” or his proxy in “The Bad Glazier,” would be Genzken’s patron saint (or imp?), whose call to “Make life beautiful!” is accompanied by a convulsive, spontaneous action that results in shattered structures.

The flâneur, with his detachment and desire for incognito, is the figure whom we most often associate with Baudelaire. But taking a cue from Jameson, we should specify that while the flâneur may be exemplary for the Baudelaire of high-modernism, he is hardly so for the Baudelaire of diabolism. Instead, as Benjamin suggests, we have a figure in whom “composure has given way to manic behavior.”31 Hardly at home in the crowd, unable to quietly blend in, this figure calls attention to himself when suddenly seized by inspiration. He takes a combat stance against the world. With a reputation for being “a legendary fighting figure in the streets and bars of Manhattan,” Genzken can productively be seen to inhabit such a persona.32 In a 1996 conversation with Genzken, her friend Neil Logan recalls Genzken’s destructive and aggressive attitude after her initial arrival in the city:

What it seemed you were doing was putting yourself in the situation where you would be most vulnerable, and then lashing out at that situation. Like putting yourself on Avenue A at five in the morning, and seeing what happens. . . . You told me that your favorite thing to do was to

30. “Notice, if you please, that the spirit of mystification which, among certain persons, does not result from effort or scheming, but from a chance inspiration, if only because of the desire’s fervor, has much in common with that humor, hysterical according to physicians, satanic according to those who think a little more lucidly than physicians, which drives us irresistibly toward a multitude of dangerous or improper actions.” Baudelaire, “The Bad Glazier,” p. 14.
go somewhere and make a scene. You told me at one point that after five o’clock you liked to get aggressive.  

Without banking too much on art-world gossip, cult of personality, or prurient fascination with self-destructive artists, in this context we ought to consider Genzken’s obvious vulnerability, aggressiveness, and provocation to the world in relation to the “parrying of shocks” that returns blow for every blow dealt by experience and urban life. In this case the particular city would be New York, where Genzken came in the mid-1990s. Genzken made three collage books in 1995–96, which were published in facsimile a decade later as *I Love New York, Crazy City*. Part diary, part archive, part uninhibited self-exhibition, the barrage of images and text coarsely attached with wide strips of colored packing tape embody an as-found rawness generated by the friction of pleasure and loathing. Takeout menus, hotel bills, ATM printouts showing dwindling funds, torn magazine pages, faxes to Germany asking for money, calendars of events (long since outdated), performance programs, business cards, and casual photographs of nothing in particular (the fluorescent pall of cheap eateries, skyscrapers viewed from the ground up, dimly lit interiors, construction sites): Genzken intended the collaged volumes to be a guidebook to New York. This seems ludicrous when one first encounters the dissociated, gritty contents. Scrapbook at most, it is certainly no guidebook. And yet, as with much of Genzken’s work, its perverse logic makes itself felt in time. In fields of visual non sequiturs, tangents, and fragments, Genzken takes pains to show phone numbers, addresses, menus, and maps. *I Love New York, Crazy City* travesties the guidebook genre’s predication on vetted, scrubbed-down, and bite-size versions of urban experience. Genzken’s is a guidebook contra guidebooks, a walking tour for the walking wounded that enacts the shocks of urban reality across its ruptured pages. Driven by impulses, governed by no rules, Genzken models for us an attitude that subverts the tourism bureau’s best intentions. Instead, she gives the city as good as she gets, parrying shocks, dealing blows, and showing us how to do the same.

The development of Genzken’s work over the past twenty-odd years exemplifies a strategy of wholesale (even hyperbolic) embrace of an evacuated condition as precisely the only way out of that condition. It is a strategy found in Siegfried Kracauer’s hotel lobby and in Benjamin’s notion of poverty. “We have become impoverished,” Benjamin declares. We have given up one portion of the human heritage after another, and have often left it at the pawnbroker’s for a hundredth of its true value, in exchange for the small change of “the contemporary.” . . .

![Image](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1162/octo.2007.122.1.53?format=inline)
Holding on to things has become the monopoly of a few powerful people. . . . Everyone else has to adapt—beginning anew and with few resources. They rely on the men who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation. In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is that it does so with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good.34

Barbaric—or diabolic, perhaps. Between spasms of convulsive laughter prompted by Genzken’s constructions, we are commanded to “Make life beautiful!” even, or perhaps precisely, at our own risk.