

# Art in America

The background of the cover is a large-scale abstract geometric composition. It features a large, bright white, irregular polygonal shape that dominates the center. This shape is set against a solid black background. The white shape has several sharp angles and facets, creating a sense of three-dimensional volume and depth. The overall effect is minimalist and high-contrast, characteristic of Ellsworth Kelly's work.

\$10 MAY 2013 100 YEARS COVER BY ELLSWORTH KELLY

Art Basel

June 21 - 24, 2013

Art Basel is pleased to announce the following:

Art Basel is pleased to announce the following:





# THE SECRET LIFE OF OBJECTS

**Spare, elegant and site-specific, Thea Djordjadze's sculptures and installations offer a delicate balance between composition and decomposition, sturdiness and ephemerality.**

**by Kirsty Bell**

GASTON BACHELARD SAYS that "we 'write a room,' 'read a room,' or 'read a house.'"<sup>1</sup> The arrangement of objects in a room tells a story: of actions, movements, of things picked up and things put down, in short of inhabitation. A room and its contents speak not only of themselves and their own histories, however, but also, as Bachelard writes, of the countless different but similar versions that occur to each person looking at them: "at the very first word, at the first poetic overture, the reader who is 'reading a room' leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past."

Thea Djordjadze's sculptures and installations foreground these enigmatic conditions of objects in rooms. Arranged on the floor or leaned against walls, they are suggestively provisional compositions of elegant steel armatures alongside shabby soft furnishings, cast plaster fragments or collections of found items. The works seem fraught with the intimation of movements that either just

took place or are about to occur, and seem to bear traces of gestures at once definite and vague.

Born in 1971 in Tbilisi, Georgia, Djordjadze has lived in Germany since the mid-1990s, first as a student at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (where she studied with Rosemarie Trockel), and most recently, following several years in Cologne, in Berlin, where she moved in 2008. When I met her in her studio near Berlin's Tiergarten, Djordjadze described how, with each exhibition, she attempts to "solve the room, to catch it." This involves taking into account the space's tangible components—floors, walls, windows, doors—as well as all of the ambiguous aspects that go together to create its atmosphere: fluctuations of light, tricks of scale, reflective surfaces.

Djordjadze's contribution to the 2008 Berlin Biennale was an interesting example of this. The "room" in question was the expansive, glass-walled ground floor of Mies van der Rohe's pavilionlike Neue Nationalgalerie. The work,

Thea Djordjadze:  
*Tickle the Sketch*  
(detail), 2012,  
carpet, steel and  
lacquer. All images,  
unless otherwise  
noted, courtesy  
Sprüth Magers,  
Berlin and London.  
Photo Stephen  
White.

KIRSTY BELL is a  
Berlin-based writer  
and contributing  
editor of *Frieze*. Her  
book *The Artist's  
House* will be pub-  
lished by Sternberg  
Press later this year.



titled *Deaf and Dumb Universe* (2008), was a collection of pale-colored furniture proxies and domestic-seeming elements, including a shelving-type structure holding rough-hewn plaster, clay and papier-mâché forms; foam-rubber and metal objects suggesting chairs; and an element resembling a diagrammatic model of a house. It was an additional detail, however, that had the effect of “catching the room” and connecting these objects to the imposing high-modernist temple they were in. A pane in one of the museum’s glass exterior walls was smeared with plaster dust and daubed a dirty gray. Its transparency desecrated, this now rather painterly surface aligned the architecture with

Djordjadze’s sculptural objects while also stamping the building with a mark of ownership.

Djordjadze’s installations are rooted in the practice of painting, which she initially studied at the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts in the early 1990s. She treats a room as a kind of expanded composition, to be articulated through freestanding elements, with correspondences of color, shape and material inspiring trajectories of thought and narrative across the space. Despite their relationship to painting, these installations resist the static quality that flat compositions can have, embracing, rather, the dynamics of movement that link time, space and material. In a short



View of the installation *Deaf and Dumb Universe*, 2008, wood, paint, clay and mixed mediums, dimensions variable, in the Berlin Biennale.



story written in 1929, Virginia Woolf describes the subtle interrelations of objects, light and space: "The room that afternoon was full of such shy creatures, lights and shadows, curtains blowing, petals falling—things that never happen, so it seems, if someone is looking."<sup>2</sup> She goes on to elucidate the difference between this shifting, hard-to-grasp reality and a two-dimensional image seen in a mirror, which "slices off" a piece of that reality to make a picture:

It was a strange contrast—all changing here, all stillness there. . . . There was a perpetual sighing and ceasing sound, the voice of the transient and the perishing, it seemed, coming and going like human breath, while in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality.<sup>3</sup>

The similarly "changing" and "transient" quality of Djordjadze's work is due not only to her ability to enhance the particular atmosphere of a venue but also to her use of materials that easily show signs of wear: foam sags, plaster cracks, glass plates become dirtied with dust and streaks. She highlights not entropy on a grand scale or the esthetics of

ruins, but rather an incremental deterioration like that of a home's furnishings over time. Djordjadze's sculptures do not directly picture the domestic as such, but they may be chair-like, bedlike, lamplike. Reticent things, they do not ask to be fully comprehended and demand instead that we viewers alter our position, reconsider, look and look again. Fragmentary observations about our bodies and our belongings emerge, about contradictory forces of frailty and determination, about the tendency to change as time progresses: to fall over and break, to droop, to fade in the sunlight or fray at the edges.

DJORDJADZE'S CONTRIBUTION to Documenta 13 last summer was easy to miss but provided a rewarding encounter for those who stumbled across it in Kassel's Karlsaue Park. A long greenhouse, relieved of its botanical charges, was inhabited by clusters of objects that evoked display devices—like the vitrines and exhibition screens of an abandoned museum—and furniture of various types. A translucent pale-blue curtain, slightly grubby at the edges, hung along one of the walls. A slab of yellow foam draped over a narrow steel support was almost a bed. A glass cabinet about the length and width of a human body, its bottom

View of the installation *As Sagas Sa*, 2012, at Documenta 13, Kassel, Germany. Photo Jochen Arentzen.











THEA DJORDJADZE



Untitled, 2012,  
plaster, foam and  
wood, 51 by 51  
by 4 inches.



Previous spread,  
view of *As Sagas Sa*,  
2012, at  
Documenta 13.  
Photo David  
Meshki.

filled with soil, had something funereal about it, like the glass coffin Snow White was placed in to be admired in death. Nearby a steel frame was hooked onto a low gray wall, with a tilted sheet of plywood held in its grasp: discrete elements meeting in mutually supportive combinations. The installation was titled *As Sagas Sa*, a palindromic snippet from a poem by T.S. Eliot. Unlike much current sculptural work that similarly depends on accumulations of disparate elements, however, Djordjadze's is largely free of specific references, requiring the viewer to draw from her own experiences to shape a reading of it.

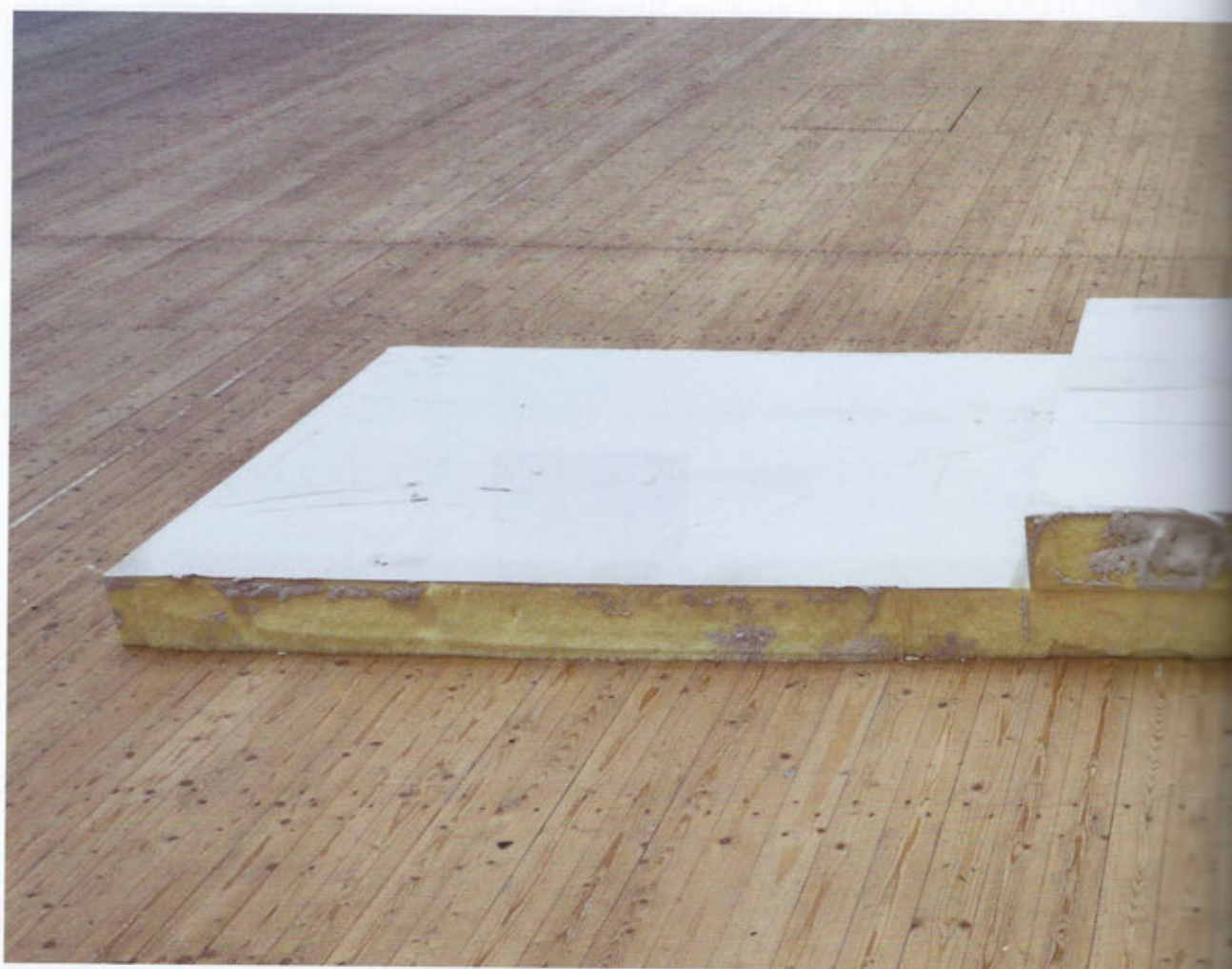
Elements from the Documenta installation were incorporated into the artist's recent exhibition at the Malmö Konsthall, in Sweden, titled "our full." In the broad space of the Konsthall's single room, some 40,000 square feet, these familiar elements—a few chairs and vitrines; a pleated concertina screen; the blue curtain, which again spanned a glass wall—were arranged in new configurations and joined by additional components. Djordjadze's exhibitions typically begin with an assortment of half-finished sculptures, various raw materials and favorite found objects that get shipped from exhibition to exhibition until they finally find their place in a work. In





View of the exhibition "our full," showing (foreground) Untitled, 2012, foam on folding bed, 49½ by 41¼ by 43 inches, and (on wall) Untitled, 1993, oil on cardboard, 26½ by 23¼ inches. Courtesy Kunsthalle Lingen, Germany.





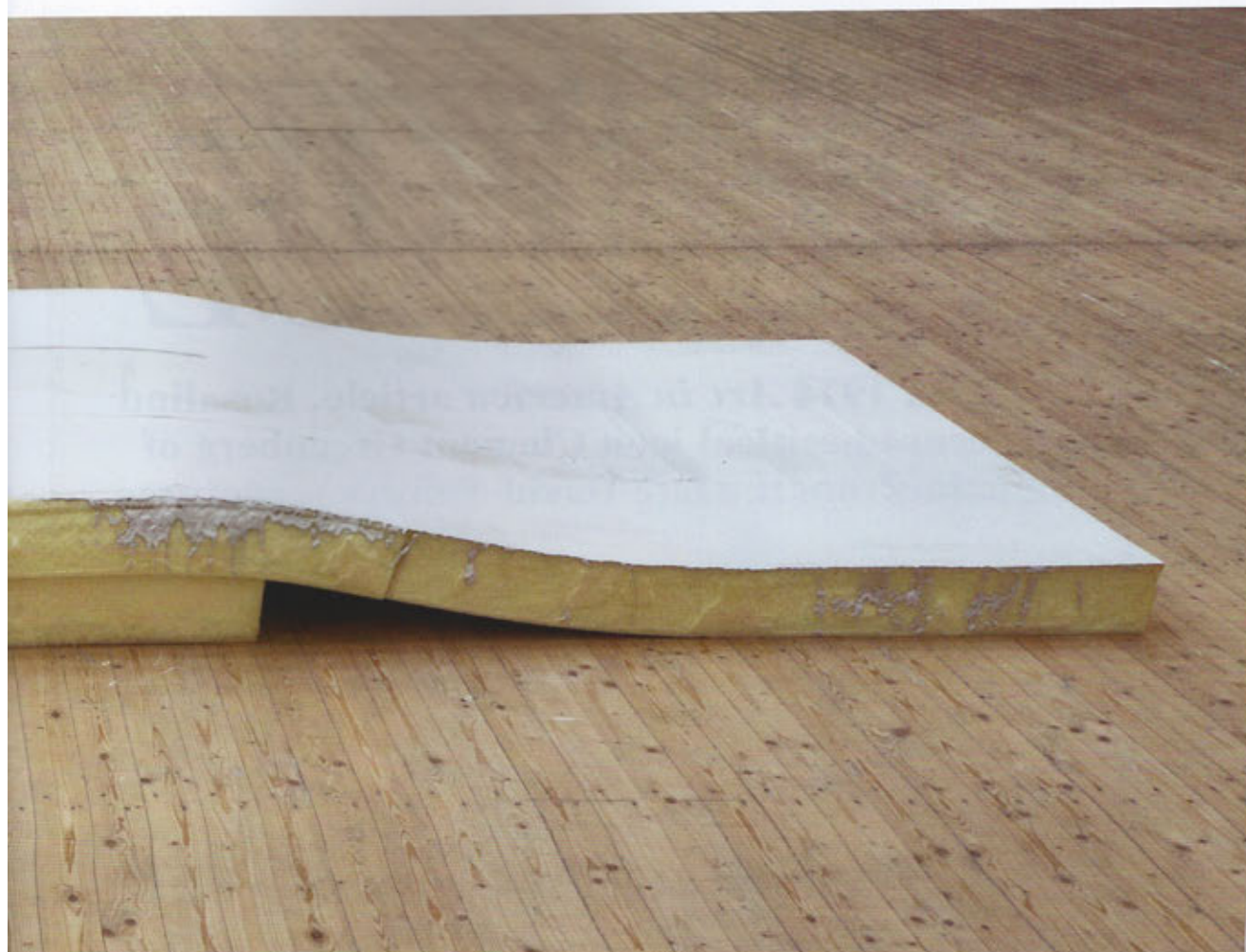
the weeks before the show opens, the exhibition space turns into a studio where works are finished, reconfigured or made from scratch. Djordjadze describes herself as "incredibly lazy," and this pressurized strategy of essentially making the show as it's being installed both accommodates and counteracts this temperament. The approach provokes a sense of urgency in the artist, which informs the works she then constructs in situ through a process of accident and intuition. After this intense period of production, the next stage is often a concerted process of removal, carried out until a spare, finely tuned installation remains.

Reluctant to discuss her art in terms of "form," Djordjadze says rather that she is "working with movements, with materiality or energy" (though here, too, she hesitates, calling energy "a strange word").<sup>4</sup> In fact, she is reluctant to discuss her art in general and to pin down with language the inadequacies of a process which is ephemeral and born of an energy harnessed while preparing a particular exhibition.

In Malmö, Djordjadze "caught" the room by tacking a band of gray linen around the perimeter, onto the lower

portion of the white walls, an evocation of the tendency of institutions—particularly in the 1970s, when she was growing up in Tbilisi—to paint the lower third of their walls a color that contrasts with the upper portion. This device emphasized the Konsthall's horizontality while enclosing its contents in a single gesture. A series of paintings (including two abstractions from Djordjadze's time at the Tbilisi art academy and several new pieces created on-site by pouring plaster into wooden frames) punctuated the expansive walls. Along with low glass vitrines and free-standing screens in dusky pink, blue and moss green from Kassel were several bent plywood objects, fixed like sconces to the space's square columns, and a floor-based sculpture in which two slabs of yellow foam covered with plaster, like vanilla sponge cake slathered with icing, rested one on top of the other. In the center of the space, a wooden frame, lying flat on the floor, contained two large plates of glass (former windowpanes from the Konsthall), their surfaces smeared with thin plaster but still reflecting the skylights overhead, amplifying the space's connection to the outdoors. Lengths of carpet on the floor brought in additional





Untitled, 2012,  
foam and plaster,  
11½ by 174½ by  
55½ inches, at  
Malmö Konsthall,  
Sweden. Photo  
Jochen Arentzen.

colors, as did a plush rug that had been dusted with pigment in a rainbow of shades, then folded up and placed behind a paravent. The attention to movement, material and energy that went into determining the exhibition's final spatial composition demanded an equivalent attention on the part of the viewer, to pick up the correspondences and analogies. The pieces, in their precise, if counterintuitive, arrangements and positions, did not reveal themselves on first glance. But as the viewer moved around them, the poses they assumed seemed to come from dance. This was a choreography of forms and things.

Is there something intrinsically feminine about Djordjadze's acceptance of intuition and impermanence as guiding forces, and of the impossibility (or irrelevance) of making a singular statement or unambiguous monument? Her sculpture is about private experience, the barely perceivable, the incommunicable. It brings to mind Rosalind Krauss's description of Eva Hesse's *Contingent* (1969) as "delivering the message of privacy, of a retreat from language, of a withdrawal into those extremely personal reaches of experience that are beyond, or beneath speech . . . a declaration about

the expressive power of matter itself, of matter held down to a level of the subarticulate."<sup>5</sup> Djordjadze's works also inhabit this realm of the subarticulate. They describe how thoughts move around inside the mind, which, as Woolf wrote, is not unlike the room itself: "Her mind was like her room, in which lights advanced and retreated, came pirouetting and stepping delicately, spread their tails, pecked their way."<sup>6</sup> ○

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994, p. 14.

2. Virginia Woolf, "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection," in *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1972, pp. 87-88.

3. Ibid., p. 88.

4. Andrew Maerke, "Thea Djordjadze: The Secret Border in Human Closeness," [www.art-it.asia](http://www.art-it.asia).

5. Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, MIT Press, 1999, p. 92.

6. Woolf, "The Lady in the Looking-Glass," p. 92.

Thea Djordjadze's exhibition "our full" was on view at the Malmö Konsthall, Sweden, Nov. 10, 2012-Jan. 27, 2013. It traveled to the Kunsthalle Lingen, Germany, Feb. 23-Apr. 28, and will appear at the Mudam Luxembourg, July 6, 2013-Jan. 19, 2014.