

# SITUATIONAL HUMOR

**In her sculptures, installations and videos, German artist Judith Hopf transforms everyday settings and humble materials into seriocomic expressions of humanist values.**

**by Kirsty Bell**

AN UNUSUAL ASSORTMENT of animals and other creatures populates Judith Hopf's work: a flock of concrete sheep, a horse that can count, a walking egg thwarted by the rigid geometries of modern corporate architecture. Branches cast from bronze appear to grow from gallery walls, while lengths of rope act like snakes, weaving their way up from the ground in defiance of gravity. Hopf's works are characterized by a slapstick humor and wry wit, qualities she employs to cast a critical eye on the state and norms of society.

Born in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1969, Hopf moved in 1992 to the newly reunified Berlin to study at the University of the Arts, signing up for the Freiklasse (Free Class), a course of study that dispensed with the usual student-teacher hierarchy in favor of a learning structure and program determined by the students themselves. Throughout the 1990s, Hopf was involved in collective art projects, collaborating with artists, architects and urban theorists to make performance and video works that sought to undermine bourgeois value systems, largely through parody. The video *Bartleby* (1996), for instance, which she made with artist Stephan Geene, adapted Herman Melville's short

story "Bartleby the Scrivener" to the format of a deadpan TV interview. The boss (played by Hopf) of a contemporary, flextime, neoliberal graphics company reports on her firm being infiltrated by a worker who (like Bartleby) refuses to participate as expected. His refusals to fulfill his role have created havoc, despite the apparent adaptability of the company's structure.

The stubborn resistance to conformity expressed in Bartleby's mantra, "I would prefer not to," comes up repeatedly in different forms throughout Hopf's work, particularly as regards the rigid parameters of social conventions, despite tolerant appearances, and the absorption of certain aspects of left-leaning, alternative lifestyles into today's relentlessly consumerist culture. Reflecting on her artistic intentions, Hopf says, "I don't want to solve anything, but I want to see my situation somehow."<sup>1</sup> The small scale and low resolution of her productions demonstrate her belief that individuals should express themselves through whatever means they have available to them. She claims: "I just really try to be myself, as honest as I can be, and say, 'OK, this is the next thing I should do; how can I do it? How can I realize it? As a human being and not as a company?'"<sup>2</sup> This acceptance

View of Judith Hopf's installation *Flock of Sheep*, 2013, concrete and steel; in the 8th Liverpool Biennial, 2014. All images this article courtesy kaufmann repetto, Milan/New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW Works by Hopf in "Puddle, pothole, portal," at the Sculpture Center, New York, through Jan. 5, 2015.

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View of the installation *Bambus*, 2008, glass and paper; at Documenta 13, 2012, Kassel.

of limitations, whether financial, physical or technical, and Hopf's rejection of the broader possibilities that a well-staffed studio or outsourced production would afford, gives her work a particular accessibility.

Hopf does not adopt an aggressive stance, preferring to embrace the potential for disruption offered by the awkward gesture or the arrival of a misfit in our midst. For instance, the tree known as the *Essigbaum* (whose name translates literally to "vinegar tree," though "staghorn sumac" is more commonly used) has cropped up repeatedly in her work, both in prints that reproduce its fringed leaf form and in bronze casts of its spindly branches. The tree is remarkably resilient, growing in neglected, economically unviable spaces such as empty lots, garbage dumps and abandoned buildings. It is not celebrated for its beauty, stability or usefulness; its strength lies, rather, in its ability to flourish despite inhospitable conditions. The Bartleby of the tree world, it establishes itself in defiance of its surroundings.

A GROUP OF BARNYARD creatures would be similarly unwelcome in an exhibition space, and Hopf's *Flock of Sheep* (2013) is doubly awkward given its intractable stasis: the blocky bodies are cast in concrete from cardboard boxes, with lengths of iron left over from the casting process as legs, and schematic cartoon faces drawn in charcoal. Made for an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Linggen ("A Line May Lie," 2013), the sheep, despite their immobile-seeming forms, are well traveled. Since Linggen, they have been shown at Deborah Schamoni Galerie in Munich, the nonprofit Studio Voltaire in London, the Liverpool Biennial, the Praxex project space in Berlin and, most recently, the Sculpture Center in New York, where they are currently on view as part of the inaugural post-renovation exhibition "Puddle, pothole, portal." The considerable appeal of these sculptures lies not only in their sympathetic facial expressions, but also in their quiet subversion of Post-Minimalist conventions: while displaying their

material means with a cursory nod to Minimalist or Arte Povera forebears, they go on to occupy the space in almost comically literal terms. Their presence suggests an analogy with audience members, as the sheep return our gaze with their round charcoal eyes.

In an essay that tracks the changing cultural significance of animals from pre- to postindustrial societies, John Berger quotes anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss: "It is because man originally felt himself identical to all those like him (among which, as Rousseau explicitly says, we must include animals) that he came to acquire the capacity to distinguish *himself* as he distinguishes *them*—i.e., to use the diversity of species for conceptual support for social differentiation."<sup>3</sup> Now, however, animals have become marginalized by industrial development, rendered as raw material to be used as a commodity, as household pets doomed to mirror the behavior of their owners or as objects of spectacle confined to the zoo. "In the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared," writes Berger. "In this new solitude, anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy."<sup>4</sup> Hopf capitalizes on this uneasiness by inviting an anthropomorphic identification with her homemade animals. Should we see them as mirrors of ourselves and as markers of our capacity for social differentiation?

In *Flock of Sheep*, as in many of her works, Hopf adopts the manner of a bricoleur, salvaging the remnants and debris of past events—"the fossilized evidence of the history of an individual or a society," as Lévi-Strauss puts it in *The Savage Mind* (1962), a book that Hopf has often cited as an influence.<sup>5</sup> In Berger's formulation, animals themselves could be seen as cultural leftovers, not unlike the disposable cardboard boxes Hopf used to make her flock. Given the anthropomorphic identification the sheep proffer, they seem to ask when our own marginalization will begin, or whether it already has.

A more obvious form of bricolage occurs in a 2012 group of works by Hopf that was displayed in the anthropologically inflected "Brain" section of Carolyn Christov-Bargiev's Documenta 13. A series of sculptures based on crude masks that Hopf fashioned from electronics packaging, these pieces articulate a temporal and symbolic divide between primitive forms of art and the state-of-the-art communication devices that now dominate daily life. For the final version of the works, produced in 2013, Hopf skews this clean dichotomy by reproducing her masks as 3-D prints, thus employing new technology and obfuscating her own position—where do her allegiances lie, if she uses such advanced means for such primitive ends? The titles, too, are significant, and include *Trying to Build a Mask from a Box of a Hard Drive* and *Trying to Build a Mask from a Box of a Smart Phone*. The possibility of failure is implicit in her attempts to balance these divergent but essential human impulses—individual expression versus scientific progress—and their similarly divergent value systems. It is the task of the artist, Hopf suggests, to attempt this balancing act, despite the likelihood of failure.

## The small scale and low resolution of Hopf's works demonstrate her belief that individuals should express themselves through whatever means they have available to them.

Throughout Hopf's work, the act of creative production itself is shown to be uncertain and prone to flaws. This was exemplified by another work included in Documenta 13: in the Breitenau Memorial, site of a Nazi concentration camp beginning in 1933 and euphemistically named an "educational work camp" from 1940 to the war's end, Hopf filled a room with a forest of glass bamboo stems constructed from drinking glasses, stacked from floor to ceiling with delicate paper leaves lodged between them. Bamboo's normal qualities of resilience, flexibility and vigorous growth were nowhere to be found in this delicate jungle that clearly acknowledged the precarious quality of history and memory, and the perilous situation of the inmates of Breitenau. Hopf's masks were also linked to this history,



*Trying to Build a Mask Out of a Hard Drive Package*, 2013, 3D print, 9½ by 9 by 7¾ inches.

having been inspired by a papier-mâché mask made by a girl in Breitenau, its shocked round eyes and gaping mouth a testament to the unspeakable atrocities committed there. At Documenta, Hopf displayed this mask alongside her own, suggesting that, even under extreme circumstances, art is an essential means for the articulation of experience.

WHILE SCULPTURE HAS been a central part of Hopf's oeuvre since the early 2000s, the majority of her earlier pieces are films, in which she often performs. Film continues to be a vital element of her practice, with recent works taking the form of short, parable-like narratives. In *Zählen!* (Count!), 2008, Hopf adapts the account of Clever Hans, a horse in early 20th-century Germany that had seemingly

learned to do arithmetic. Ultimately, a psychologist determined that the horse's responses were based not on mathematical knowledge but on its sensitivity to the unconscious body language of its teacher. In Hopf's film, a horse stamps its foot repeatedly to provide correct answers to an increasingly complex series of mathematical problems, much to the consternation of a group of skeptical observers, their faces painted with exaggerated expressions. Hopf's interest in this story came about as a result of her own experiences as a teacher (she has taught for the majority of her working life, most recently as a professor at Frankfurt's Städelschule) and her research into questions of pedagogy.

Hopf's film *Some End of Things: The Conception of Youth* (2011) similarly reflects her contact with younger generations as a teacher. Commissioned for the film program of London's Frieze art fair, it responds in part to the spontaneous riots and looting of shops by youths that had erupted in London at the time, following the police shooting of an unarmed black man. Hopf wanted to make a work that conveyed conflicting perceptions of youth: on the one hand held up as glorious and desirable, and on the other subject to constant criticism. The 3-minute film, shot on 8mm and transferred to video, follows a man, dressed as a giant egg, who traverses the walkways and corridors of a glass-and-steel architectural complex until faced with a narrow rectangular doorway. There is no way for him to get himself through this opening without destroying his egg shape and very being. He gives up. While almost ridiculous in its simplicity, this film provides a version of the perennial chicken-and-egg question, asking, for instance, whether social exclusion is determined by external structures or is the result of intrinsic qualities. Conformity is here presented as essential to progress, while the transparency of glass buildings is shown to disguise the strict limitations that modernism imposes. Like the sheep and the masks, the film sketches out a critical stance on a contemporary social situation in a form that seems flippant or almost trivial. Hopf's work plays consciously on this line of triviality, embracing the obvious, the banal and the throwaway gesture in order to look closely—without recourse to didacticism—at some of the most complex but pertinent problems we face.

Hopf's most recent film, *Lily's Laptop*, commissioned by Studio Voltaire in 2013, is further evidence of her interest in subversion. Here, she adapted a suffragette film from 1911, *Le bateau de Léontine* (Betty's Boat), in which a young girl determined to play with her father's toy yacht but not allowed outside to do so floods her family home. Hopf's version shows a young au pair who, locked out of the household computer, turns on the kitchen taps in her host employers' slick, modernist apartment as an act of revenge. The update of the original rebellion against gender-based exclusion now shifts the emphasis toward youth in general, and to a time when being denied access to the Internet is perceived as significant disenfranchisement. Resistance is the only option, here through the medium of water, which fills up the kitchen, begins to drip through the ceiling of the apartment below and eventually rushes down the con-

Below, *Some End of Things: The Conception of Youth*, 2011, 8mm film transferred to DVD, 3 minutes.

Bottom, *Lily's Laptop*, 2013, video, approx. 5 minutes.



crete stairwell—furnishings and artworks crashing along with it. The scenario is not dark and apocalyptic, however. It has a comic tone, due to the neighbors' frantic reaction in contrast to Lily's stoic composure as her belongings begin to float around her, accompanied by an increasingly tense, staccato soundtrack. Though underlined with malice, this is slapstick instead of horror. Nevertheless, it manages to put a finger on urgent issues of today: the omnipotence of the computer and the resultant demands for a lifestyle of 24-hour connection.

In *Contrat entre les Hommes et l'Ordinateur* (Contract between Man and the Computer), 2010, a manifesto of sorts that conflates writings by Hannah Arendt and French 18th-century proto-feminist Olympe de Gouges,<sup>6</sup> Hopf writes: "It has now become apparent that the human assets of perception and production no longer have anything to do with one another. . . . As a result of this, we are capable of producing more than we perceive and indeed more than we

are capable of perceiving." The earnest tone of these words is contradicted by the manifesto's ending, which, sounding like lyrics lifted from a soul ballad, declares: "We are nothing / Oho / You are nothing / Oho / I am nothing / Oho / Without Love." While she delivers these words with tongue firmly in cheek, Hopf nevertheless suggests that our capacity for love and compassion may be the best and most readily available form of resistance in our new machine age. ○

View of the exhibition "Untitled (4)," 2014, at the PRAXES Center for Contemporary Art, Berlin.

1. Judith Hopf, in conversation with the author, May 2014.
2. Ibid.
3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted in John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*, London, Penguin Books, 2009, p. 17.
4. Berger, *Why Look at Animals*, p. 21.
5. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 22.
6. Hopf presented this written piece as a performance for "Kopietheater," a program organized by curator and artist Ian White for the 2010 Berlin International Film Festival. The text is available at [www.eflux.com](http://www.eflux.com).