

ARTFORUM

MÖNCHENGLADBACH, GERMANY

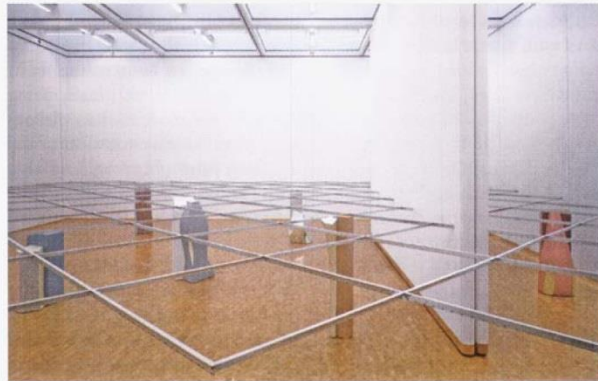
Rita McBride

MUSEUM ABTEIBERG

Assembled out of softly rounded wooden elements and painted a bright yellow, Rita McBride's *Arena*, 1997, filled the entire exhibition space of the Witte de With in Rotterdam when it was first shown that year, reaching almost to the ceiling. Yet its imposing format appeared to be truncated, an abbreviated version of what was possible—the curve along which nine rows of seats rose up could have been augmented by several more to produce a complete circle, but was instead left incomplete. Fittingly, in the Museum Abteiberg's "Public Works," McBride's first retrospective in Germany, *Arena* can only be seen in the form of *Arena Modular Model*, 1996, a miniature version of the piece presented under a glass dome. On the museum tour that followed the work's first installation in 1997 (no other work by McBride has been more frequently exhibited), *Arena* was invariably accompanied by an elaborate program of readings, concerts, and performances; here in "Public Works," flyers, ads, and posters announcing the activities for which the sculpture served as forum are merely reproduced in the monograph accompanying the exhibition.

But what are the "Public Works" to which the show's title refers? For McBride, a Des Moines native who has been living in Düsseldorf since 2003, and who teaches at the city's Kunstakademie, "all objects presented here originate somewhere other than in sculpture: in the public domain, public spaces, public activities, public symbols," according to Susanne Titz, director of the Museum Abteiberg. "The specific terminology for these things is formed in a variant of the phrase in which the adjective 'public' becomes the subject of a statement: '(The) public works.'" McBride's fascination with the public realm is such that she even uses neutral shapes that, as Mark von Schlegell points out in his catalogue essay, resemble the ubiquitous electrical distributor boxes found on the street in every major German city. The artist luxuriously translates these mundane forms into white powder-coated aluminum sculptures in her series "Managers," 2003–2007, giving them a modified Minimalist vibe; but a residue of utility remains inscribed in them as well.

Right next to "Managers," McBride has hung works connected to her design for a public art project: a sculpture more than 170 feet high to be mounted above the Effnerplatz in Munich, a curvier version of the Eiffel Tower rising above the Bavarian metropolis (whose buildings are not particularly tall). The openwork silhouette of the structure is reminiscent of a wasp-waisted cooling tower; the discussion that accompanied it, documented in the catalogue with clippings from German local newspapers, cast the work in terms of the human body's shapes: Slimmer? Taller? Hourglass? Finally, McBride has dubbed the construction *Mae West*, and von Schlegell, in the catalogue, concludes, "Since its naming, the sculpture's body has been popularly accepted," its anthropomorphic reception speaking volumes, perhaps, about the public for which the work is intended. The sculpture is now slated to be built in 2009, more than seven years after the first call for proposals.



View of "Rita McBride," 2008. Floor: "New Markers," 2008. Suspended: *National Chain*, 1997–99.

McBride's latest series, "New Markers," 2008, is a cross between the basalt steles Joseph Beuys once planted beside each of his thousand oak trees in Kassel and the patterned plastic surfaces popularized by Italy's Memphis design firm in the 1980s. Media discussions and public policy have been incorporated as a constitutive feature of the work itself, in good Beuysian tradition, while at the same time McBride cites a dandified object fetishism: a tension that sets the artist's work loose in the world as a hybrid of picture-perfect megalomania and a healthy dose of irony for all.

—Catrin Lorch

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.