





# Rita McBride



## (Re) Negotiating the Public Realm

BY CHRISTINA LANZL

American artist Rita McBride has spent the past decade living and working in Germany. She can be characterized as a sculptor with a passion for probing materials previously unexplored in the arts or at the cutting edge of research. Her works typically investigate the conventions of architecture while attempting to pinpoint the—sometimes ugly, sometimes humorous—underbelly of the public realm. Some critics have struggled to define McBride’s work, noting her unusually wide range of materials and projects, including several collaborative books. Writing about McBride’s 2010 Kunstmuseum Winterthur exhibition, Dieter Schwarz characterizes her work as defying congruence and emphasizes the intellectual (rejecting the term “conceptual”) nature of her approach.<sup>1</sup> Though McBride’s essentialized abstractions clearly place her in the Modernist, Minimalist tradition, Dirk Snauwaert emphasizes the significance and nature of her inquiry: “The hybridization of forms, the scale of the sculptures, the choice and craftsman-like qualities of materials... mark a clear refusal to be put in a linear tradition of—a mostly male—North American sculptural legacy, and make her project a singular one. This attitude of unconventionally negotiating the pleasurable, but also the haunting

Opposite and above detail: *Mae West*, 2011. Carbon-fiber, 171 x 105 ft.



Above and detail: *Arena*, 1997. Twaron and wood, 13 x 66 x 99 ft.

*Mae West* is the largest public sculpture to date in Germany. *Obelisk*, which is located at Emscherkunst, a new sculpture park in the Ruhr region, was originally commissioned for Emscherkunst.2010 in celebration of the Ruhr region’s designation as a 2010 European Cultural Capital. Both works are fabricated of rust-free carbon, a brand-new material, which McBride developed in partnership with CGB (Carbon Grossbauteile), a Bavarian corporation specializing in large-scale carbon construction components.

McBride first introduced her work to Munich audiences with the installation of *Arena* at the Kunstverein München in 1999. The artist’s widest-traveling work, *Arena* was initially created for Witte de With in Rotterdam. This modular, “knockdown” sculpture of quickly assembled and de-installed modules forms amphitheater-style seating constructed of wood and Twaron (a heat-resistant synthetic fiber/fiberglass developed in the early 1970s by the Dutch company AKZO).<sup>3</sup> Working with each exhibition venue, McBride

subtexts of the aesthetics of transparency and multiplication that are the Modernist program, created combinations of contexts between the visual and the urban, questions of representation and of social situations.”<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of McBride’s 30-year path of critical inquiry, the museum has served as a lab space where she conducts

research for real-world applications. Early explorations of aesthetics and the problems of sculptural staging and of car-related themes provide a formulation for her later discourse on art in the public realm and on transportation-related work.

McBride recently installed two monumental public art projects, one in Munich and one in Essen, Gelsenkirchen. Munich’s



programmed her sculpture with performances by invited artists for the duration of the show, thus establishing an interactive environment and repositioning the sculptor as an impresario staging performances and happenings by other artists.

In 2000, McBride held her first major museum exhibition at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in Germany. She once again exhibited *Arena*, as well as cast aluminum and bronze maquettes interpreting parking structures at various scales, which continued an earlier series of parking structures in sleek forms. McBride's now notorious *Toyota* (1990)—a full-size Toyota Celica fabricated in rattan from a CAD model—formed a logical complement to these parking garages. According to Matthias Winzen, "Her sculptures, installations, architecture-related interventions, artist co-operations...and large-scale projects in

public places stand for an art that is not satisfied to be a reflexive depiction of contemporary reality and so introduces draft-like images into that reality; an art that takes clear political and art historical positions and yet still puts its trust mainly in artistic means; an art that is aware of itself and its history, but accepts neither art conventions nor art institutions as givens or limitations, preferring to see them as a platform for the next stage."<sup>4</sup>

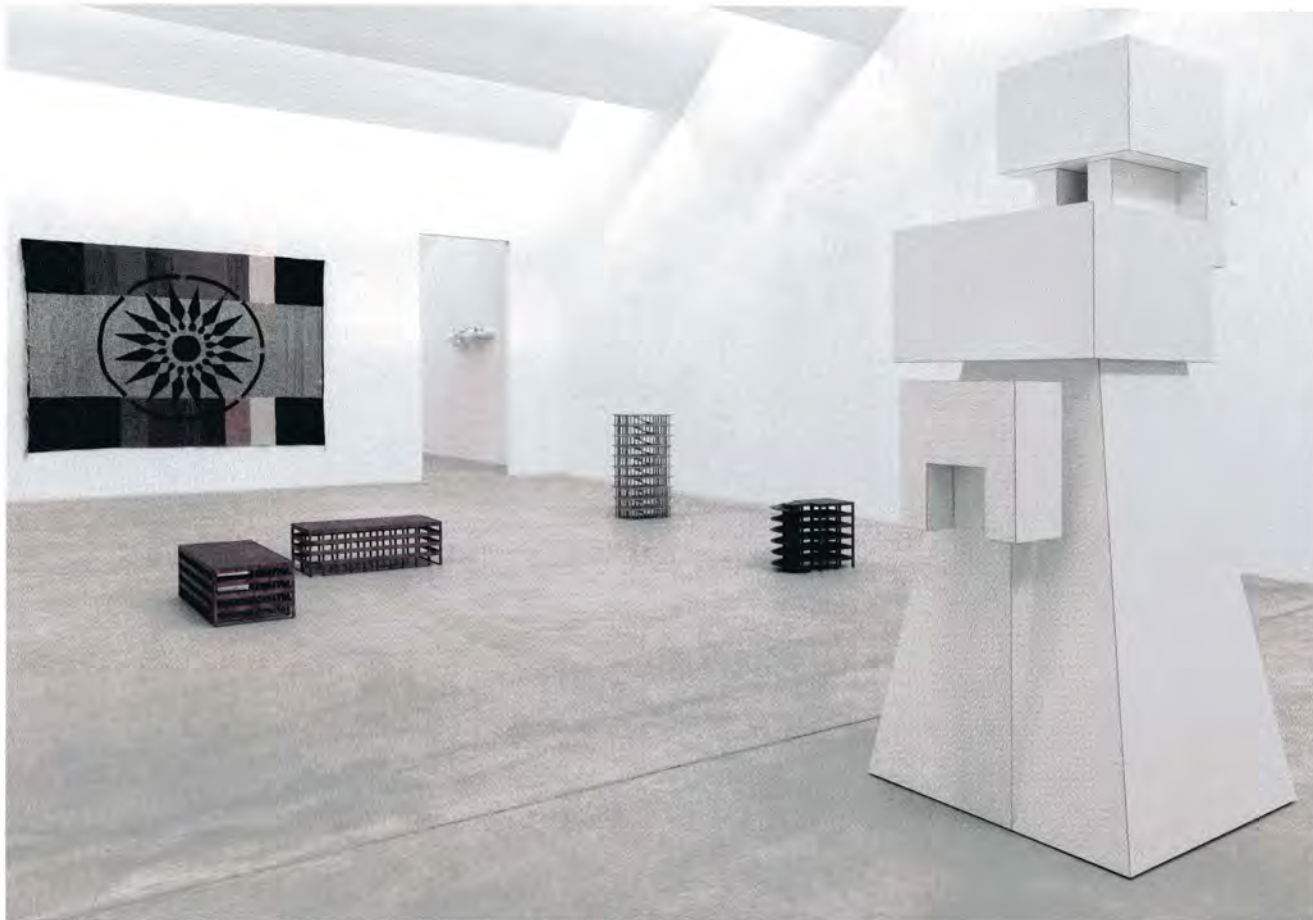
In designing *Mae West* for Munich's Effnerplatz, McBride applied her hallmark methodology to presenting an object and its situation as if on a stage. Effnerplatz is currently dotted with a few office and hotel high-rises abutting residential pockets. McBride's 156-foot-tall, dark gray sculpture in the form of a rotational parabola establishes a new landmark for the east side of Munich, which still lacks a sense of place. *Mae West*'s elegant curves perfectly complement the angular architecture from a distance. Viewed close up, from

the ground, however, the sculpture's narrow, hyperbolic mid-section appears a tad stodgy.

The title gives a concrete reference to the sculpture's abstract form, alluding to the slim waist and erotic aura of the 1930s actress. Though the lack of any apparent connection to the city of Munich or the site is unusual for current, place-based ideas of public art, locals had already lovingly bestowed two nicknames on the sculpture by the time it was installed: "the egg cup" and "Knitting Nancy." This folkloristic touch offers a glimpse of the deep affection that Munich residents have for their city and its public realm.

Interest in *Mae West* has been intense, not least because of its €1.5 million budget (approximately \$2.4 million). The project, which was funded as part of the City of Munich's Mittlerer Ring artery tunnel construction, required a nine-year timeline. As happens so often, the need to justify cost competed with clear aesthetic, urban,

Installation view of "Previously" at Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 2010.



and economic benefits. Munich's public art office, Quivid, added a significant contemporary work to its public art collection. Future real estate development and the technological advances gained from introducing a new product to the market are also beneficial.

Because of the project's unprecedented scale, CGB's patented carbon fiber product required special permitting and extensive testing that will serve future artistic and commercial applications. Compared to steel, carbon is a light material; *Mae West* weighs in at a mere 57 tons. With this work, McBride has continued a career-long collaboration with workshops and fabricators, beginning with the fabrication of *Toyota* and other rattan objects in Asia. Researching affordable materials and processes preceded the cutting-edge technology of her current work.

Visible from afar, the 46-foot-tall *Obelisk* establishes a beacon at the former harbor of Essen, Gelsenkirchen, transforming an inconspicuous spot in the landscape into an imaginary monument. Conceptually, McBride's work extends a trail marked by Richard Serra's Cor-ten steel *Bramme* gate. A popular precedent may be found in Munich at a plaza near the city center, where a 60-foot-tall, early 19th-century bronze war memorial takes the form of an obelisk. McBride's use of a technologically innovative material represents a contemporary interpretation of this ancient form and underscores the region's efforts to redefine and update its image.

*Obelisk* was one of 20 public and landscape art installations created by more than 40 artists/teams for Emscherkunst.2010. Many of these works engaged

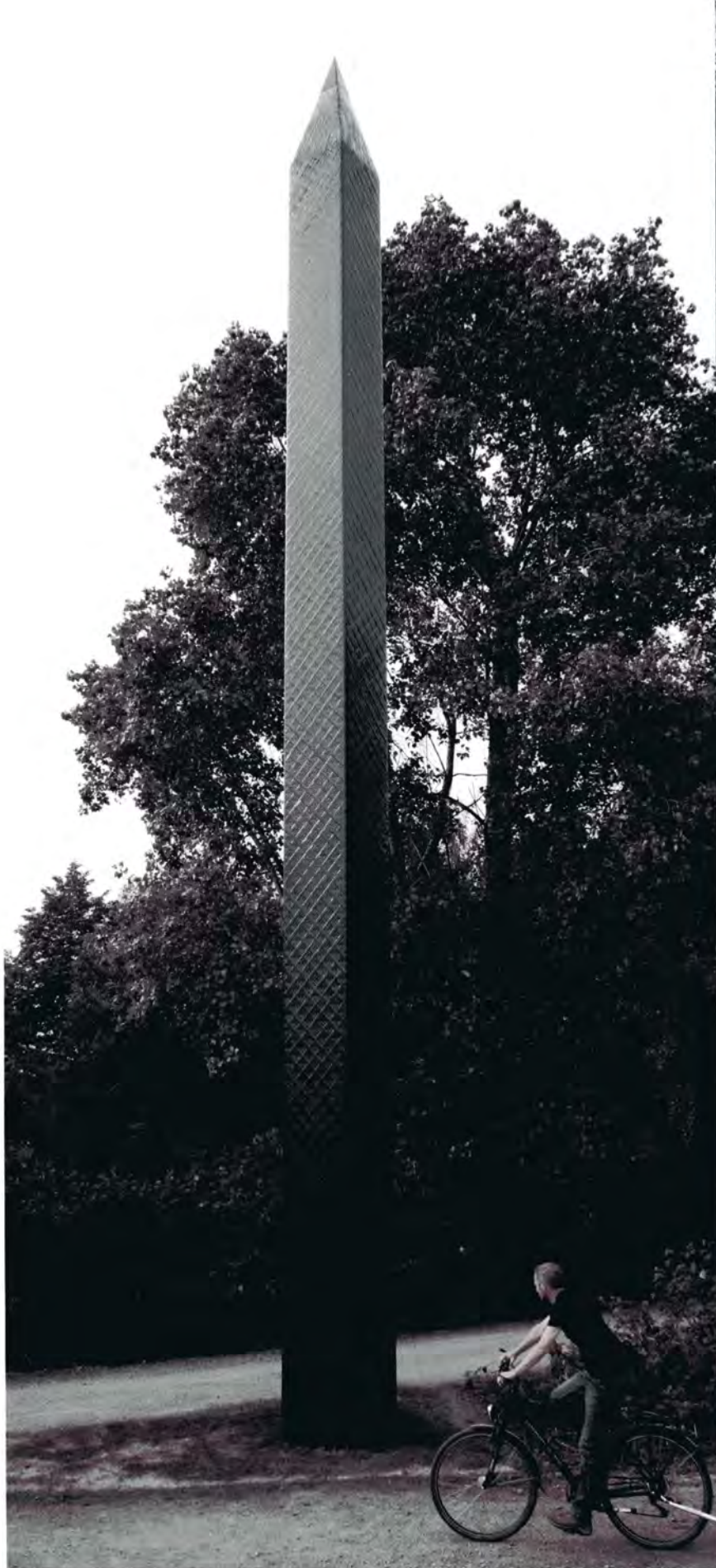
viewers through a creative use of existing sites and urban features, from sluices, water treatment facilities, and quays to industrial ruins and wastelands. Following the demise of its coal and steel industries, the northern Ruhr region is re-imagining itself as a scientific and academic center while reclaiming an ailing industrial landscape on a polluted river for cultural and recreational use. Region-wide collaborative effort has made the restoration of a 21-mile strip of Emscher Island the central element in the newly conceived, and named, valley of Neues Emschertal.

McBride's commission challenged her to respond to her own previously critical assessment of public sculpture: *Obelisk* was preceded by the temporary *Civic Sculpture*

Installation view of "Previously" at Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 2010.







Left and detail: *Obelisk*, 2010. Carbon-fiber, 46 x 3 x 3 ft.

ture in Memoriam at Museum X, organized in 2007 by the Ruhr region's Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach during museum renovations. Here, McBride proposed the end of the fountain, in particular, and of public sculpture in general. As in *Arena*, she staged a public program, which included the city's cultural deputy speaking at a "memorial service."<sup>5</sup> Her new works, however, demonstrate that public art can be alive and well, when artists are able to connect with the right partners and collaborators in the cultural landscape.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dieter Schwarz, "Here, There and Everywhere—Knowledge, Reference and Irony in the Work of Rita McBride," in *Rita McBride: Previously* (Düsseldorf, 2010), pp. 15–23.

<sup>2</sup> Dirk Snauwaert, "Double Bypasses," in Matthias Winzen, ed., *Rita McBride: Werkshow* (Baden-Baden, 2000), pp. 15–16.

<sup>3</sup> Mark von Schlegell, *Rita McBride: Public Works* (Cologne, 2010), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Winzen, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> von Schlegell, op. cit., p. 108.

*Christina Lanzl is a writer and consultant specializing in contemporary and public art.*