

DEBORAH EVERETT FLUID ENCOUNTERS

As continuous pulsing networks or deftly scattered units, Claudia Schmacke's liquid environments are unexpected and mesmerizing. Employing the element of water in both flowing and motionless states, she illumines the workings of the physical world as well as the ways we perceive it. Her sculptural installations are minimal in form and sophisticated in implication—expanding our awareness of the passing moment, our concrete surroundings, and the interconnectedness of the two.

Early on in her career Schmacke began to realize that she wanted to work with something organic and mutable, something with an ephemeral nature. Her first foray in that direction involved the use of paraffin in her work, with its simultaneous suggestion of both liquid and solid. This approach was fueled by her interest in the fluid realities of contemporary physics and philosophies of time and space. Later, during a fellowship in Italy, Schmacke encountered da Vinci's notes on naturally-occurring phenomena and patterns of movement in water. At the same time, she studied Renaissance gardens and natural landscapes, and became fascinated with fountains, terraced streams and the role of water in activating a space. She started to see water not only as a substance with immense possibilities for sculpture, but also as a microcosm of the physical universe.

Schmacke soon began to work with aerated water pumped through clear tubing, initially building on the innovations of artists with related sensibilities. "Corner" (1993) and "Hammock" (1995), for instance, present ordered rows of water-filled tubing—draped in a way that evokes Eva Hesse's trailing cords and tubes. Similarly, an untitled piece from 1998, has ties to Walter de Maria's "Broken Kilometer", as it covers the entire floor of the exhibition space with parallel hoses of running water. Like her two earlier pieces, that work yielded a sense of the uncanny -- in this case, a stream displaced to the gallery's interior --but it also suggested a kind of connecting fabric or network, with an all-over structure that was of growing interest to the artist.

Extending this startling sense of a captive yet flowing liquid, Schmacke developed a broad spectrum of cyclical arrangements and self-generating systems. In "Ripple" (2000), for instance, the tubes formed a closed loop of wavy concentric circles, whose luminous bubbles pulsed in endless circuits within the dark interior of the gallery. For her solo show at Plane Space (2003), the hypnotic rhythms in much of Schmacke's work shifted into over-drive, as she fed aerated green water through large bundles of tubing at high speed—causing them to shake and wobble in place. These dense coils were connected by long, smooth-running tubing, so that the installation struck a note somewhere between articulated biological systems and procedures within a laboratory. Perhaps her most ambitious piece to date was exhibited at the Aldrich Museum (2003). For "Drawing the Flow" Schmacke created a corridor with a glass ceiling over which water gently streamed. At the end of the corridor, the water fell from the ceiling into a seven-foot glass tank. Viewers entering the space walked under a horizontal veil of water as they were drawn toward the dazzling cascade at its end—where the sense of plunging release implied both abundance and waste. These remarkable encounters with water in unexpected situations are what make Schmacke's work visually powerful; the overlapping levels of content are what give them their

subtle complexity. Throughout the variety of forms that Schmacke uses, there are recurring elements of duality and paradox. The juxtaposition of flow and containment is the most apparent set of opposites, but her work also explores the sensation of time passing, or else seeming to stop— and the relationship of each to physical movement. Just as stillness connotes a suspended, eternal state, motion generally implies duration and the passage of time. Both conditions are visible in Schmacke's work— from the presence of rushing streams, as above, to silent pools, as in a work created in 1999 at the Chinati Foundation—where mirrored “bowls” of water were set in the ground, suggesting timeless repositories of the sky's reflected image. All the same, when Schmacke's work incorporates movement, it often does so in seamless cycles, without a defined beginning or end. This pattern of identical, recurring elements generates an aura that is meditative and seemingly infinite, despite the movement involved. In other works, the rhythm fluctuates as the viewer encounters a gradually changing, or alternating, cycle—as in “Splash” (2002) where a high-powered water jet inside a room suddenly shoots spattering liquid against a window. This jarring action is interspersed with “rest” periods when the water stops and the room goes dark—so that viewers outside perceive the slippage of time in phases, as one step leads to the next. These varied circumstances reveal our tendency to sense temporality – or not – depending on the conditions that fill each time-frame.

The spaces in which Schmacke's work appears are often integral to the overall effect. “Ridge” (2001), for instance, was installed in an internal passageway in the center of Cologne's Deutzer Bridge—a long, tunnel-like space that duplicates the arching shape of the bridge. The water in this work's parallel hoses moved at the speed of walking, so that viewers could advance along with it, in what appeared to be an endless pas de deux – as the end of the installation was hidden by the floor's curvature until one traversed the entire length of the work. Another engagingly site-specific piece, “Light Spots” (2003), was installed at the Goethe-Institute Salvador-Bahia in Brazil. There 222 clear bags of fluorescent-dyed water were placed on the floor, where they gathered and concentrated the gallery's ambient light. During the day, sunlight entered the space from two sides, creating a natural graduation of color and radiance in the water. At night, the room's black fluorescent light was reflected by the water, so that the bags appear as isolated lights within the darkness. In 1999 at the Chinati Foundation, Schmacke created an almost opposite effect, by installing her work in a very cold, gray room with meatlocker-style doors; in “Quintet for Wash-tubs”, she placed five galvanized tubs beneath funnels on the ceiling, so that the funnels' slowly dripping water was collected below, echoing eerily as it landed in the thin metal containers.

Schmacke is also concerned with the element of sound, or conversely, with silence, and the ways in which each can re-define one's surroundings. In several of her works, the sound made by the action of the pumps creates a softly droning periodicity. The tempo varies from tranquil and chant-like to the industrial undertones of a more aggressive and relentless regularity. In other works, sounds are entirely natural, as in “Drawing the Flow”, where the moving water creates a sloshing cadence that builds toward the dramatic crescendo of its descent into the tank. The psychological resonance of these varying aural components amplifies the work's visual effect, or, alternately, creates ambiguity through counterpoint.

This body of work encompasses an enormous range of concepts—including the organic and the artificial, liquid and solid, flux and restraint and, as cited previously, motion, time and space. Its explorations of these and other parameters are probing and highly original, re-casting the elemental in terms of the contemporary. Ultimately, Claudia Schmacke's water-works are systems that bridge multiple levels of experience and illumine the essence of physical reality within a world of virtual appearance.

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