


Cosmic Girl

The Berlin-based artist's meditations on time, space and the nature of objects take shape in sculptures that are pared back, stripped down and often surprisingly humorous. How does she pull off what are, in effect, exercises in both style and modal logic?

by Kimberly Bradley portrait by Simon Menges



When Alicja Kwade was young, her father didn't tell her the usual fairytales at bedtime. Often, just as she was falling asleep, he'd say things like, 'Just imagine space is endless.'

She did. And still does.

Primarily focused on sculpture but often straying into photography and video, Kwade's practice centres on a compelling series of mind exercises: thought experiments with space and time, jumps into parallel worlds and infinite possibilities, and wildly imaginative explorations of what's real and what's not. "I'm fascinated with the borders between science and suspicion. All the in-betweens. Mr Houdini is one of my biggest heroes," she says laughing, and jerking her head towards a large poster of the magician Harry Houdini, on the back wall of her vast two-room studio in Berlin's Kreuzberg.

Kwade is no escapologist, but she's certainly an illusionist. Her often confounding objects highlight deep-seated social conventions, the laws of physics and the mysterious natures of time, space and light (why is gold universally valuable? What if we could feel how fast the earth is flying through space?). The artist plays with time and its wrinkles (her video *Ein Tag in 7 Minuten und 23 Sekunden*, 2006, is a Christian Marclay-esque series of clocks and wristwatches culled from 24 feature films, each scene running just long enough to not be narrative, depicting one day in 7:23 minutes). Light, too (*Teleportation*, 2010, sees the light of an art deco lamp reflected on glass sheets strategically placed throughout a space). In works like *Kohle (Union 666)* (2008), she questions how society allocates and identifies value by covering bricks of coal with gold leaf. In *Bordsteinjuwelen (Die 100 Auserwählten)* (2008) she had jewellers cut normal street stones into faceted 'diamonds'.

She presents improbable scenarios using doubled or multiple objects – like her famous set of two silver Nissan Micra cars (*Nissan (Parallelwelt 1+2)*, 2009), with identical rusty dents and steering wheels on opposite sides (one was purchased in Bristol). The doubling or multiplying, she says, is not about "creating twin objects, but cutting time into a lot of slices and putting it back together again". What? Kwade explains a theory that there are actually 11 dimensions, some of which we can't access but exist parallel to the ones we know. The multiplication and mirrors go some way to representing the time and space we can't perceive.

In an ongoing body of work from 2008 collectively titled *Aggregatzustand (Aggregate Condition)*, everyday objects (including mirrors) are curved, often melting down walls in an almost clichéd surrealist way; but it's perhaps more akin to Alice's looking glass in Lewis Carroll's book. I'm not the first to notice the thematic

connection, as well as the connection with her name: in researching this article, I found a German-language interview in which Kwade reveals that 'Alice' is the name in her German passport, given to her by immigration authorities when she immigrated with her family from Katowice, Poland, at age eight.

"I'm trying to see what reality is for me, and what it is for us all," says Kwade, dragging on a cigarette. Her animated speech makes the conversation feel like an old friend is taking you on a brisk jaunt through a funhouse. "I'm trying to see what *could* be the structure of reality. I mean, we're living on a ball that's flying around. That's crazy. Imagining that, everything is kind of possible. Because we can't understand it anyway. We're just animals, our brains are too small. Trying to understand the situation we're all in is kind of incredible."

Around her studio is ample evidence of her apparently relentless quest. Research becomes object, object becomes research. A series of weirdly jagged metal rods lies on the floor, which Kwade later tells me are renderings of the invisible 'borders' between the world's different time zones – often arbitrary structures humans have imposed on the passing and measurement of time. A thick door, typical for a prewar Berlin apartment, stands on end, rolled into a spiral. A ring of concentric circles in the form of tape and notes on the floor reveals that the artist mocked up a small version of the installation *Die Gesamtheit aller Orte (The Totality of All Places)*, 2012, versions of which were on view at her Berlin gallery, Johann König, as well as Art Basel's Unlimited (that same year) right here. A model of her current exhibition, a solo museum show at the Kunstmuseen Krefeld's Museum Haus Esters near Düsseldorf, tumbles across the floor in the atelier's second space. On one wall is a multitude of clocks from different eras – here not an artwork, but clearly a manifestation of her preoccupation with time. I arrive in the early evening as one of her several assistants is leaving for the day. The artist usually stays a few hours longer, alone. "I have, depending on the work, two to five assistants, but during the day, I always feel a little observed," she says. "I do my research and develop my ideas in the evening and at night."

The daughter of a cultural scientist and former gallery owner and conservator knew at age five that she wanted to be an artist. Now thirty-four, Kwade came to Berlin at nineteen to study sculpture at Berlin's University of the Arts, mostly because, she jokes, "New York and London were too expensive". She spent those early years learning, working, meeting other artists – like boyfriend Gregor Hildebrandt, with whom she's been allied for 12 years – finding her inspirations (she mentions Robert Smithson's formal

(continued on page 81)

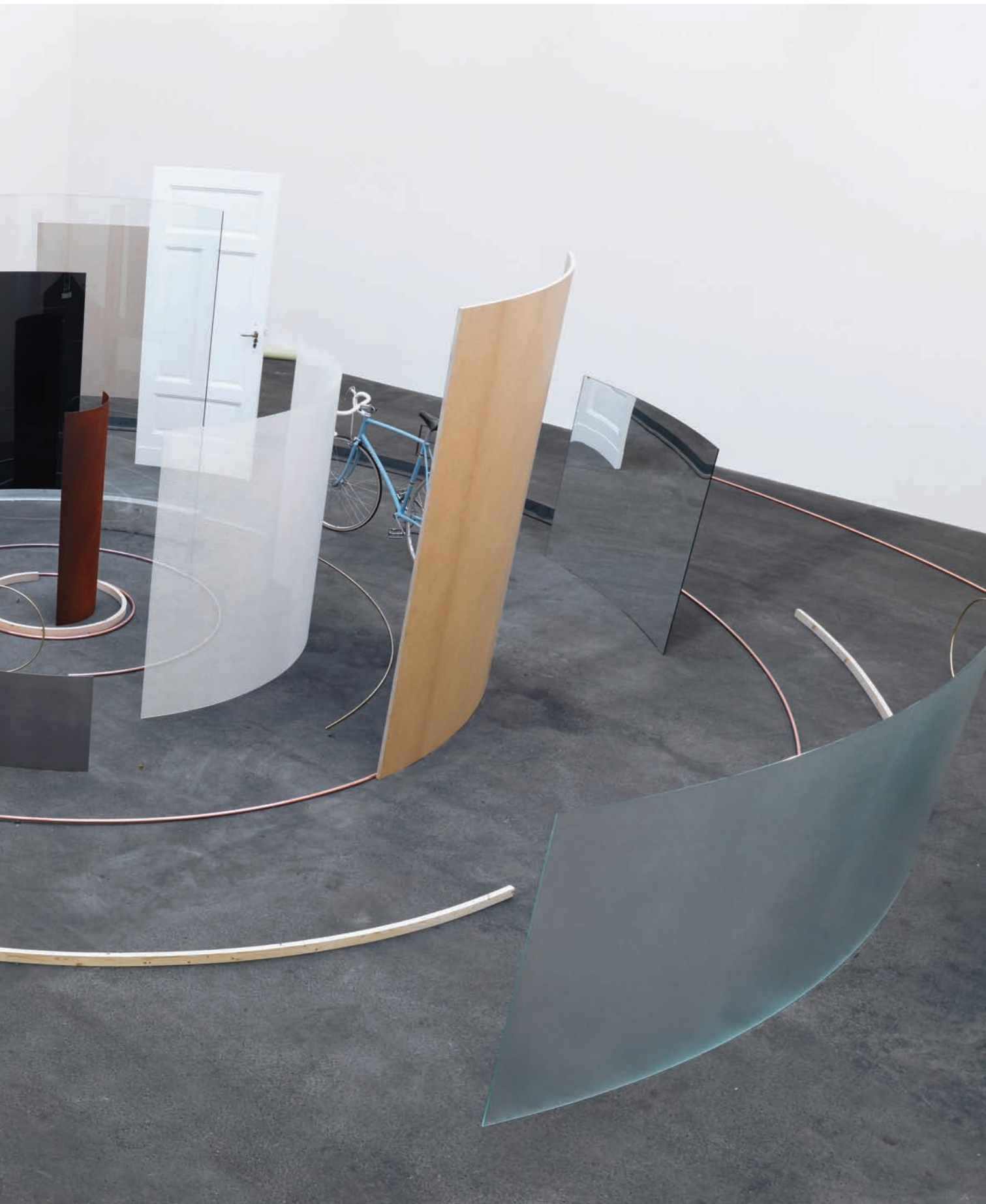


Parallelwelt 1, 2008, eight Kaiser-Idell lamps, eight mirrors, 98 × 392 × 56 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Johann König, Berlin



Andere Bedingung (Aggregatzustand 6), 2009, steel,
copper, glass, mirror, iron, mop embroideries, seven parts,
dimensions variable. Photo: Roman März





‘I’m trying to see what *could* be the structure of reality.
I mean, we’re living on a ball that’s flying around. That’s *crazy*’



above *Nach Osten*, 2011, five speakers, microphone, amplifier, electric motor,
pendular lightbulb, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Johann König, Berlin

preceding pages *Die Gesamtheit aller Orte*, 2012, metal plates, metal pipes, metal mesh, perforated metal,
metal rails, steel plates, steel bar, copper tubes, brass rings, brass rods, euro coins, wood mouldings,
wood panels, glass panels, mirrors, door, bricks, bicycles, door, window, lacquer,
rust, 54 pieces, dimensions variable. Photo: Roman März

concerns, Gordon Matta-Clark's lighthearted approach and Italian philosopher/sociologist Elena Esposito's theories on doubled reality and capitalism) and honing her own ideas.

Kwade first gained wider recognition when she won the Piepenbrock Förderpreis for Sculpture in 2008 – the news of which came in the form of a surprise phone call. Apparently the nominating curator had seen Kwade's *Palette* (a piece consisting of a varnished mahogany shipping pallet) at Art Cologne in 2006; the jury lauded her use of 'highly varied concepts, techniques, and materials'. The award included a stint teaching at her alma mater as well as an exhibition at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof museum. Her work in the intervening years has placed her within a generation of young European artists – like Germans Michael Sailstorfer and Kitty Kraus, the Swedish Nina Canell and Austrian artist Judith Fegerl – exploring aspects of nature, time and space; perhaps testing belief systems, exposing what's 'real' and 'true' in our environment, or plumbing the most physical 'object-ness' of the object in a world in which objects are increasingly abundant and thus increasingly meaningless. Yet Kwade's work stands on its own in terms of combining extensive (obsessive?) scientific-artistic research with a highly reduced, sometimes severe, formal sculptural language... and often a subtle sense of humour. Kwade likes to gently tease us into thinking.

No matter how manipulated Kwade's objects – both found and fabricated ones – might be, they are always flawless. The spiralled door looks like it was always that way – it's in fact several doors, cut into slices and bent, acquired from a place outside Berlin that sells a vast array of everyday objects. The artist also finds items on eBay, like the Kaiser Idell lamps that crop up in her lightworks. She'll reject pieces in which the human manipulation is obvious. The effort of fabrication needs to stay invisible, and the objects "light and easygoing", as she says (she leaves most of the fabrication to outside experts), yet the concepts behind them must be airtight – thought through from the materials to the physical laws governing them to the ideas she's expressing and exposing. The completed installations and exhibitions often feel like compellingly interactive set pieces, and have been described as filmic. "I can't fake so much. I have to be straight with my works and be sure of what I'm doing 100 percent," she says.

We discuss the mechanics of a recent show; the inauguration of König's new, still-raw Kreuzberg space in a brutalist church called St Agnes during Gallery Weekend Berlin in spring 2013. *Nach Osten* (2013) took the Foucault's pendulum concept and translated it to a bright lightbulb swinging from a very long (14.5-metre) cord through a very dark space, its windy, whooshing sounds amplified to dramatic effect. It's an idea Kwade had been waiting to

execute, but hadn't been able to in smaller spaces. The bulb was calibrated to shift its swinging axis against the earth's eastern rotation, something Kwade worked out with professors and engineers. The vernissage was a spectacular show of sharp shadows and sound, attended by hundreds, and talked about for weeks afterward. *Nach Osten* was a physical, awe-inspiring experience, but I admit I initially missed its deeper level (openings are horrid that way; later viewers reported perceiving the rotation). Kwade doesn't mind. "The important thing is that the object itself is touching something in the viewer. Some works are more complex and you can't get the inner plot without someone explaining it. But if the viewer *does* get that vision and my starting point, it's important to be very honest." It's as if, by offering us coherent initial access with pieces like this – and, in other work, providing us with familiar markers with her found everyday objects – Kwade gives a glimpse of or passage into her possible worlds and extra dimensions. Only if we really want to come along, that is.

The temporal issues before the opening were far more banal: "We had only one day to install the pendulum, and there were a lot of mechanics to keep the swinging smooth. I couldn't really test it before the opening, so I had five beers right away because I was so nervous," she says, laughing.

Her candour, passionate curiosity and, yes, honesty are refreshing at a time in which so many others in the world of emerging art seem to be about developing a personal brand, or making work that is often over-referential and gimmicky. Kwade has just returned from the opening of her Krefeld show, whose centrepiece (the mockup of which I'd been eyeing on the studio floor) sees 1,417 stones, the largest of which weighs between six and seven tons, set outdoors and decreasing in size as they slowly enter the museum building and become sand. The work *1417 + (16.08.2013) (2013)* refers to the 1,417 asteroids whose orbits are close enough to earth that NASA has deemed them dangerous (as of 16 August 2013, at least; the number continues to grow). It's about time, where things begin and end, point of view and scale. "I'm just starting to work big," says Kwade, when I ask about the latter. "It's always a question of budget, of place. It's not easy. It goes slowly." Actually, 'slowly' no longer seems to be the right word. Trying to remember those high-school physics experiments in velocity and inertia, I visualise the artist's career on a clear trajectory. As we have known since Newton, an object in motion tends to stay in that state of motion. ar

Alicja Kwade: *Solid Stars and Other Conditions* is on view at i8, Reykjavik, through 14 December, and her exhibition *Degree of Certainty* is on show at the Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld, until 16 February



Ein Tag in 7 Minuten und 23 Sekunden, 2006, mini-DV on DVD, monitor, 7 min 23, 3 + 1AP. Courtesy the artist and Johann König, Berlin