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SI VISIONS: LENA HENKE ON
AUTOCARTOGRAPHY
DECEMBER 19, 2016

VIDEOS

A Sculptor Grapples With Robert Moses' Brutal Urbanism

New York's controversial "master planner" haunts artist Lena Henke's intimate ceramics and maps.



In 1936, Robert Moses gave a 30-day eviction notice to the people of Brooklyn's Barren Island: A bridge would be built where their homes stood. Protests did not prevail. Over the years, the remains of their bulldozed homes, and of other New York "slums" cleared by the controversial parks-commissioner-turned-chief-of-all-construction, were deposited into a shoreline landfill called [Dead Horse Bay](#).

Moses planned to turn that landfill into green space. But in the 1950s, its flimsy topsoil cap burst, baring to the sea the detritus of all those condemned New Yorkers: roller skates, tooth brushes, newspapers, doll houses, thousands of bottles. To this day, Dead Horse Bay is lined with that ephemera. In the shadow of Marine Park Bridge, it's become a place of urban lore, and a magnet for collectors and artists.

[Lena Henke](#), a German sculptor and painter based part-time in New York City, regularly picks the sands of Dead Horse Bay. The ghostly, ocean-worn toys and containers fascinate her—as does the brutal, visionary force that put them there. “[Moses] was so radical,” Henke says in a new short documentary produced by the [Swiss Institute](#), a contemporary art museum in New York. “He wasn’t really interested in people. He was more interested in movement.”

Henke’s art—exhibited at recent biennials and triennials in [Berlin](#), [Montreal](#), and [New York](#)—explores Dead Horse Bay and Moses’ urbanist legacy by inflecting individual-scale objects with infrastructure-scale ideas. A series of ceramic horse hooves evoke modes of architecture and transportation: In one show, called “[Heartbreak Highway](#),” [hooves are shaped around plastic jugs cut with tiny, dollhouse-like windows](#); in another, [mangled hooves become the wheels of a 1950s sedan](#). An [installation in Basel, Switzerland](#) featured walls dripping with water from an custom-built rooftop water tower, flooding miniature ceramic buildings and newsprint slumped on the floor. Henke has also made maps that transpose [bulging human veins](#) and animal body parts into New York’s urban outline.

Moses’s radical, top-down plans often seemed to ignore the human costs. He rescaled the city’s infrastructure with a “[meat ax](#)” (his words), to the detriment of many poor New Yorkers—and to the great benefit of others. His legacy is still greatly felt in New York City’s roads, bridges, parks, and public housing, and it still performs a complicated dance. “People loved him and hated him. I love and hate him,” Henke says in the film. “He created this blueprint for New York, and I think this is what I’m so interested in.”

