Phyllida Barlow
"demo"
Kunsthalle Zürich
29.10.2016 – 19.2.2017

Where other artists preached the decommodification of the artwork, Phyllida Barlow practiced it. For over four decades, she has worked mainly on large, site-specific projects that were usually destroyed after being exhibited. This was in part a reaction to the context in which her identity as an artist was formed. When she graduated from the Chelsea school of art in 1963, the dominant movement in British sculpture was the New Generation, a group of erstwhile students of Anthony Caro who engaged with sculpture as a masculine, even macho, endeavour. It was a world that Barlow found too alienating to conform to. All this perhaps makes it not so surprising that she didn't have gallery representation until 2010, since when she has had what seems like a great many high-profile commissions. Her work, previously so transient, and improvised, now paradoxically consumes monumental resources for its transport, installation, and display. This new exhibition at the Kunsthalle presents Barlow in the somewhat awkward role of the outsider, the anti-monumental sculptor come in from the cold.

The show is split into two parts. The first part consists of three large rooms filled with an enormous interlocking construction of materials such as wood, metals, screws, plastic foil, styrofoam and textiles. The materials were mostly recycled from her previous exhibition in Tate Britain, delivered from the UK on big trucks and rearranged to deal with the new architectural possibilities in Kunsthalle. Although the viewer can walk through the work, they cannot participate in it, but rather become lost in it, absorbed by it.

The second part is on the upper floor and functions as an intervention that reveals the renovations currently being undertaken in the Löwenbräu building. Upon entering the space, you find a big triangular room that is empty except for a stage constructed from pressboard; one of the walls has holes

Phyllida Barlow
Installation view

drilled into it that are roughly the width of a hand. Looking through them you see brick-lined interior walls, scaffolding, paint, foil, buckets, tools, machines, dust and a lot of other stuff. The arrangement changes every workday until the renovations are finished; Barlow is here appropriating a process that is happening anyway, and making it visible through her art. What we get is an insight in a process that is usually hidden: the holes resemble what are called "truth windows" in interior architecture, windows that reveal the material underpinnings of a wall behind the rendered surface.

If what is revealed or demonstrated upstairs is the reality under the surface of the institution, downstairs, where the architecture is intact, the installed work is what seems improvised. Even though the mostly wooden construction is firmly screwed together, it gives a fragile impression. It openly demonstrates the modular, repetitive and labour-intensive way it was made. Horizontals and verticals are interrupted by diagonals that give the work its dynamism, even as they secure it structurally. Its composition recalls modernist paintings, except that it has no borders and we can never see the complete work, not least because walls get in the way. Out of numerous pieces one gigantic sculpture has been formed, but we see only fragments.

Barlow's "demo" reveals the paradox that lies at the bottom of all production aesthetics – namely, that the processes of construction can never appear in completion, because making art is inherently dynamic. Like motion in still photography, it can only be implied. But if motion is difficult to represent in photography, how much harder is it to capture the process of construction in the exhibited work? Across its two parts, "demo" demonstrates that an exhibition space is held together not only by the heterogenous materials of sculpture, but also through constant work and revelatory honesty.

Teresa Retzer