

Lena Henke  
*The City Transformed*  
16 May–21 Jun 2025  
55 Walker

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A city gets under the flesh. Its streets and byways channel flows of movement; its noises sync with an inner pulse—flickering, persistent, electric. No matter how quickly or radically an urban space changes, traces of its past lives remain metabolized in the bodies and minds of its inhabitants. Metropolitan life, as Georg Simmel writes, extends in a wave-like motion, neither ending with the physical body nor the area to which its activity is confined. The city is always here and elsewhere—a landscape both physical and mental.

Lena Henke's second solo presentation with Bortolami, *The City Transformed*, draws its title from a series of seminal lectures given by the late architectural historian Barry Lewis at Cooper Union from 1994–2019. In the exhibition's titular work, a late 19th-century map of Manhattan spans ten large cowhides, fragmented and stretched taut over individual panels. The city's streets are laser-etched into the surface of the animal's skin. Cowhide carries its own layers of history: the flesh and labor of cattle shaped the contours of early industrial urban life, not only fueling markets through the livestock and leather trade, but also the imagination, through the myth that Manhattan's irregular southern streets followed their grazing paths. Despite such rich associations, Henke's invocation of skin isn't limited to the animal alone. Her transposition of the urban grid onto hides converges with resonances of human form, seen in the suggestion of curving limbs and an outstretched hand poised to seize the city itself. New York's iconic street grid and architectural logic, as recorded in an 1879 map originally published as an inlay to the *Evening Post*, have been burnt into the hide and overlaid with layers of contemporary drawing and text. Here, skin becomes an intimate archive in which different strata of time, memory, and interpretation intermingle—a "cartography of remembering and forgetting."<sup>1</sup> This sense of intimacy and immediacy is enhanced by enigmatic snippets of text culled from Lewis' lectures. Warped by AI-audio transcription software, his reflections on New York City are interspersed with technical hallucinations that imbue the text with a confessional, diaristic air.

Long captivated by architecture, urban planning, and the shifting patterns of urban life, Henke builds upon an ongoing tendency within her practice to map the space of the city onto the psychological and corporeal realms of human experience. *The City Transformed* further deepens this engagement by drawing parallels between the dynamic, shifting nature of urban space and the inherent instability of both body and skin. Just as cities continually reorient and reconfigure themselves, body and skin are similarly unstable entities, perpetually reactive to the spaces they inhabit. The philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy refers to the body as a space that can be considered neither full nor empty because it lacks an inside and outside. Neither static nor impermeable, Nancy's body-place is "a skin, variously folded, refolded, unfolded, multiplied, invaginated, exogastrulated, orificed, evasive, invaded, stretched, relaxed, excited, distressed, tied, untied. In these and thousands of other ways," he writes, "the body makes room for existence."<sup>2</sup>

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Within Henke's transformed city, an amorphous 2.5-meter-long figure hangs suspended from leather reins. The face of St. Barbara—the patron saint of architects, builders, and masons—crowns a bulbous, contorted limb ending in a massive horsehoof, a recurring motif in Henke's practice. Made from carved Styrofoam cast in aluminum, the work's meticulously chased finish belies the cheapness of its original material, typically associated with mass production and industrial use. Floating in space, the horizontal pull of its tortuous form—part saint, part animal—counters the vertical thrust of the American cityscape, offering a vision of reverie, interiority, liminality, and transformation.

An original oak subway bench from Union Square Station—borrowed from a private collection—occupies the space alongside Henke's new works. This relic of old New York operates in an ambivalent space between functional and sculptural installation, acting as a hinge between work and viewer, memory and material. Both prop and participant, it resonates with the historical textures that bristle beneath the skin of *The City Transformed*: objects in circulation, signs of civic use, body and infrastructure—entwined.

— Jesi Khadivi

Lena Henke (b. 1982 in Warburg, Germany) lives and works in New York and Berlin. Henke has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Aspen Art Museum, Marta Herford Museum, Belvedere Palace, Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, Kunsthalle Zurich, Schirn Kunsthalle, Kunstverein Braunschweig, and White Flag projects. Her work has also been shown in numerous institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Kunsthalle Bern, Hessel Museum of Art, the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, and MoCA Detroit. Her work has been featured in major international exhibitions including the Timisoara Contemporary Art Biennale, Romania, (2017); Manifesta 11, Zurich, Switzerland (2016); The 9th; Berlin Biennale, Germany (2016); Le Biennale de MONTREAL, Montreal, Canada, (2016); at the Triennale of Small Scale Sculpture in Fellbach, Germany (2016); and The New Museums Triennial, New Museum, New York (2015). Henke's work is in the collections of ICA Miami, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Hessel Museum of Art, MKG Siegen, MAMCO Geneva, Kunsthalle Bern, and Kunsthalle Bielefeld among others. In 2022, Henke was recipient of the Marta Award granted by the Wemhoner Foundation. In June 2025, Henke will be the subject of a solo exhibition *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* at ARCH Athens, Greece.

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1 Christina Irrgang, "The Skin Through Which We Speak," trans. Jesi Khadivi, in *Skin: Membrane, Organ, Archive* (Berlin: Art in Flow Verlag, 2023).

2 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 15.