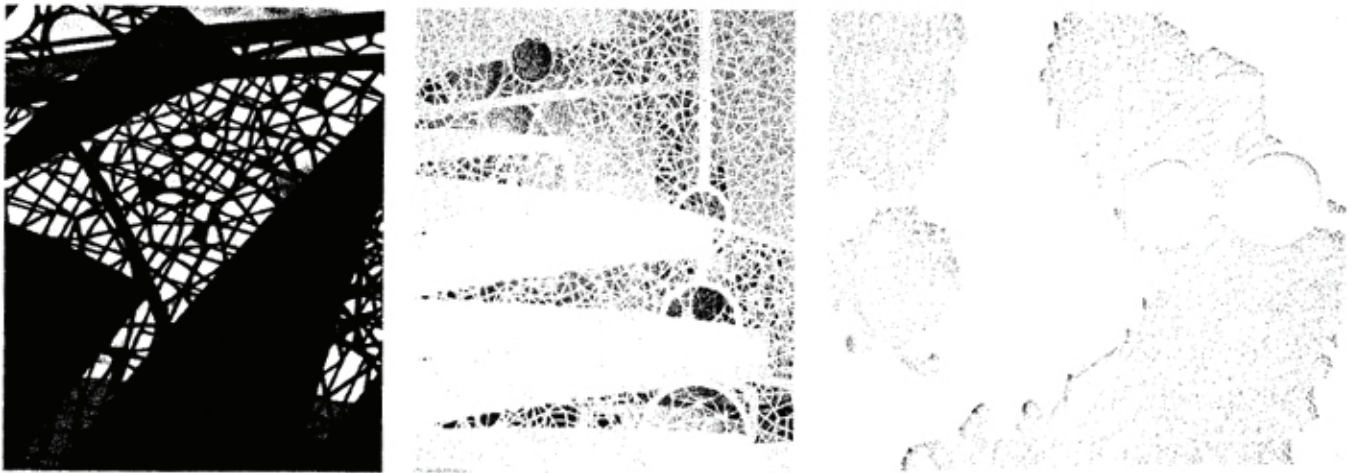


EXPERIMENTS, 2016  
Laser-cut paper various sizes



A sort of restlessness animates Beate Gegenwart's work. A greedy, joyful experimentation with materials and processes in the service of intellectual inquiry about place and identity, dislocation and belonging, people and the spaces between them. Gegenwart reads and writes, eloquently, about these subjects and more, but she really expresses herself through her hands. Her materials—vitreous enamel on steel, electroplated 3-D printing and paper—bring to life meditations on borders and boundaries, crossings, movement, and water, always water. The resulting objects, though not explicitly narrative, reflect the journey of a welcome guest, born in Germany and living in Wales, who nonetheless cannot help longing for home.

Gegenwart's worldview, and, ultimately, her work, is informed by her close readings of poets and artists of the 20th century, many of whom left home to find their truest selves in other lands. Poetry, compressed and symbolic, seems a fit match for the way art objects stand in for bigger ideas and messier emotions. At Gegenwart's suggestion I read the noted twentieth century German language poet Ingeborg Bachmann, and her lover, poet Paul Celan. I reacquainted myself with Walter Benjamin. Together they seemed to constitute a tri-part lens, a natural framework, through which to view her work. Ultimately, it is the poets who cast the biggest shadow. Substitute "objects" for "poems," and words that are written about Bachmann seem to be really about Gegenwart. "supple and beautiful and clear on the surface, but actually composed of layered, almost imagistic, metaphors, which, like small explosive devices, detonate the more often one [revisits] her work" [2]

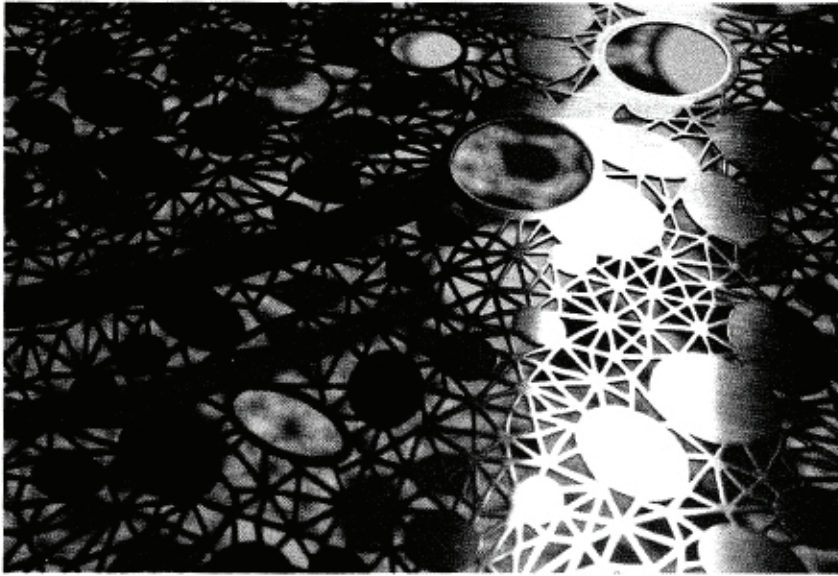
It is not surprising that Gegenwart's closest affinities are with writers whose first language is her own. Bachmann's influence can hardly be overstated. Her poem "Bohemia Lies by the Sea" expresses not only generalized Utopian longings but specifically Gegenwart's love of water: the landlocked kingdom of Bohemia never lay by the sea. Through Bachmann, the notion of "the impossible Bohemian seacoast has become a symbol for the European search for meaning and identity." [3] But Gegenwart is by no means alone in claiming "Bohemia" as a touchstone. Anselm Kiefer borrowed the title for one of his dense, allusive paintings. So did Earnest Woodall, a little known American jazz composer, for a short composition containing musical references not only to the sea but the music of Kurt Weill as well. Of Celan, Gegenwart says, "I only need to read four lines and my head is filled with images."

The more time I spent with Bachmann and Celan, with "Bohemia Lies by the Sea," and the artwork it spawned, fanning out in an ever widening gyre of influence, the more I saw in Gegenwart's layers of metal and glass. Walter Benjamin's monumental Arcades Project dovetailed with her interest in ambiguous, permeable boundaries, and conflation of interior and exterior space. A grant enabled her to set off among arcades of northern Italy. She documented a dizzying array of vaulted arches, row upon row of curves overhead. Photographs are evocative, but as a maker, her desire was "to understand these spaces through making, to activate them by exploring rhythms of form and light through rhythmical forms of production, such as the 'to and fro' of the laser through cutting and engraving." Gegenwart's work not only mirrors the materials, but the lacy perforations of her enamelled steel latticework seem to interpret the iron window frames of Victorian glass buildings. Working as she usually does in series, the slotted wall forms, with their shadows and spaces, concretize the interrupted sunlight, appearing and disappearing, the silhouetted forms, and again, movement, as indoors becomes outdoors.

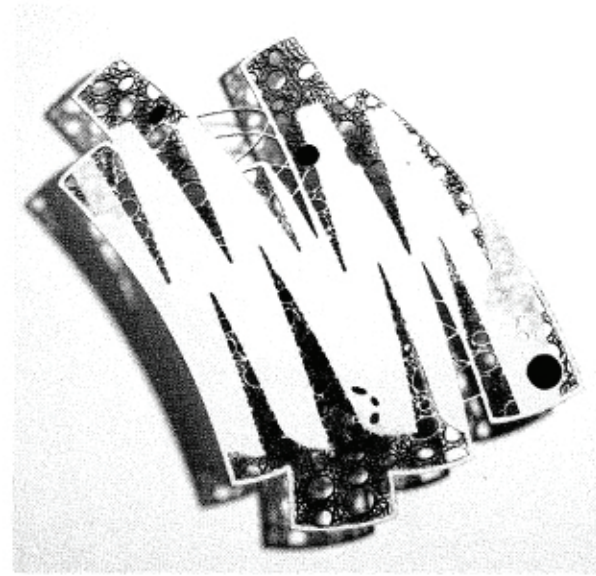
Material curiosity and technical challenges excite Gegenwart and drive her investigations as much as philosophical ones do. She is a fearless 21st century materialist, embracing technological advances such as laser cutting, etching and 3-D printing along with her mastery of vitreous enamel on steel. A former ceramic artist who worked in bone china, she routinely cut into the clay, removing more and more until the material could no longer support her ideas. Metal, with its structural integrity, allows her to work much bigger and realize her ideas more completely. Marginally limited by the size of her studio kiln, already a massive 70cm on a side, the laser and waterjet cutters further freed her from the restrictive size of manageable sheet metal. She uses the new technology to develop a new language of image and object, the water jet cutter becomes her translator. Unlike those for whom technology dictates design, Gegenwart brings her form language to the technique. She even embraces 3-D printing, a process that produces objects in an unappealing plastic. She redeems the intricate layered forms through electroplating, essentially transforming them into metal that may be oxidized or patinated. Without the intrusive plastic surface, the viewer's eye can peer down into a bowl within a bowl, a cloth wrapped around a lacy, perforated dish, or table setting conflating the cloth and the dish.



**TO AND FRO SERIES, 2016 detail**  
Stainless steel  
44cm x 51cm



**TO AND FRO SERIES, 2016**  
Enamel on steel slate felt



Everything begins with drawing. High contrast ink drawings are “subsequently reinterpreted for water jet or laser cutting, predominantly in stainless or mild steel (occasionally in fine silver)” Although the steel will be digitally assisted, there must always be handwork. “The pieces are enamelled in a kiln using ‘wet process’ [liquid] vitreous enamel, then drawn, scratched, abraded, polished and laser engraved.” Gegenwart typically works with a limited palette of enamelled black and white, and the silver of bare metal. It’s almost not a choice, but her default selection. She comes from northern Europe and lives in a grey country, where colours are muted, and sunlight slants pale, glancing off the globe.

Ironically, metal, especially steel, so grey and masculine, best represents the paradox of fragility and precariousness of cultural dislocation and the strength necessary to survive. One can portray the spaces so much better in steel, the better to show the absences. Gegenwart has a passion for the way things feel, the physical act of making, the Zen of a subtractive process. She searches out physicality, getting dirty, a sense memory from ceramics, like sticking one’s hands in a bucket of glaze.

**FLIGHT BEHAVIOUR 1, 2016 detail**  
 Enamel on steel felt  
 57cm x 55cm

Looking at the pieces on the wall, there's a hint of jaunty optimism, resiliency, in all the curves and diagonals. It is only in the lacy scrim of cloudy memory or the worn-away edges where surface colour has been removed, that hints of sorrow appear. We always glimpse the past within the present. Gegenwart concretizes this notion by creating walls and doors that are windows, through which are glimpsed what has gone before, what has been left behind. A lattice-work of steel in silver and white hides and reveals in equal measure.

Together the multi-layered, ambiguous objects are arranged like phrases, clauses, sentences or pages in a book. Thinking of the gallery space "as a paragraph, Gegenwart says, "I wanted to write a room." Like the exposition of a musical theme, —language change—introduces the themes of identity and dislocation in widely varying bodies of work. Included also are artist books, in which one can tell a story that's not on one page. Each element in a series might be a chapter, a page, a paragraph, a fluid sentence, punctuated, improbably, with red. One group developed from brushstrokes suggests the broad motion of handwriting. Blown up to wall size, brushstrokes (To and Fro Series) are not only gestures, but a nod to the still active enamel sign industry in the UK, reinterpreted as pure movement, pure action. Eventually they morph into a web of icy, flickering bubbles, or a frosted window.

Without actually portraying human figures, Gegenwart's allusive compositions suggest the absences all wanderers experience in journeys benign or brutal. Despite the sense of loss that accompanies migration, there is also renewal in the transformational possibilities of work, of art, of creating new work. Gegenwart's methods - sanding, etching, adding colour and eroding it - repetitively return to the same spot, like a wave returning to shore.

**Marjorie Simon is a metalsmith and writer residing in Philadelphia, USA.**

#### References

- [1] Beate Gegenwart. This and all unattributed quotes taken from written and spoken communication with the artist.  
 [2] <https://ahgekun.wordpress.com/2010/06/27/paul-celan-ingeborg-bochmann-correspondence/>  
 [3] Julia Boll, quoted <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poems/bahemia-ies-sea>