SPOTLIGHT

LARISSA FASSLER

MARA HOBERMAN

LOOKING BOTH INSIDE OUT and outside in, Larissa Fassler has spent more than two decades scrutinizing plazas, train stations, monuments, and entire city neighborhoods across Europe, Canada, and the United States. Many of the artist's subjects are urban public spaces in cities where she has lived: Vancouver, where she was born, in 1975; Montreal; Paris; London; and Berlin, her base since 1999. As a Berliner, Fassler routinely passed through the city's Alexanderplatz station before deciding to map the underground transportation hub, using her own body as a measure to create the cardboard model for *Alexanderplatz*, 2006. But the artist has also focused her attention on places where she is more of a tourist, like Istanbul's Taksim Square. Three large pencil drawings titled *Taksim Square, May 3–June 9 I*, *II*, and *III*, all 2015, summarize the ten politically charged days between the second anniversary of the Gezi Park protests condemning Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's conservative government and the general election results announcing that, for the first time in thirteen years, Erdoğan's party had failed to capture a majority in parliament. Engaging viewers who have intimate knowledge of a place as well as those who have never visited, Fassler's diverse two- and three-dimensional maps

Opposite page: **Larissa Fassler, *Taksim Square, May 31–June 9, III* (detail), 2015**, pen and pencil on paper, 47¼ × 55⅛".

Left: **View of "Larissa Fassler: Building Worlds," 2024**, Kunsthalle Lingen, Germany. Floor: *Alexanderplatz*, 2006. Wall, from left: *Moritzplatz—Forms of Brutality*, 2019; *Moritzplatz (Licht, Luft und Sonne/Light, Air and Sun)*, 2017. Photo: Larissa Fassler.

Below: **View of "Larissa Fassler: Building Worlds," 2024**, Kunsthalle Lingen, Germany. Floor: Works from the series "Vancouver Glass Objects," 2023. Wall: *Vancouver DTES*, 2021–22. Photo: Larissa Fassler.

and models speak both broadly and specifically to issues including gentrification, migration, racism, sexism, homophobia, homelessness, wealth disparity, and surveillance.

Fassler goes to great lengths to capture and integrate culture, politics, history, current events, and even personal associations in each of her scrupulously detailed renderings. In addition to her primary research—days, weeks, and months of on-site observation—the artist digs deep into historical and sociopolitical context. On the surfaces of her paintings and drawings, handwritten snippets of conversation, descriptions of smells, and accounts of human interactions commingle with timelines and statistics referencing historical events and socioeconomic data. Fassler typically layers these texts on top of bird's-eye-view drawings of plazas, stations, and city blocks. The results may resemble heavily annotated blueprints, but the artist's notes are anecdotal and analytical, rather than architectural. Playing with the visual language of architecture and urban planning, she challenges both practices' lofty ideals. *Les Halles*, 2011, for example, is a detailed maquette of a destroyed shopping mall in central Paris that she made out of dirty found cardboard and gaffer tape. Eschewing rulers and other traditional drafting tools, Fassler sketches freehand and makes floor plans subjectively scaled to the size and shape of her own body. The results, intentionally imperfect and tenderly humanized, reinforce certain shortcomings of urban planning while bringing us closer to the lived experience of a place.

The artist's familiarity with architecture stems from her childhood. Her father, Rainer Fassler, is an architect who worked with the influential Canadian architect and urban planner Arthur Erickson on major commissions including the main courthouses at Robson Square in Vancouver. Completed in 1979, this three-block complex encompasses public spaces and government offices. It is precisely the kind of urban development the architect's daughter would go on to explore and critique in her own creative practice. Notably, however, when Fassler did turn her focus to her hometown, she chose to study Vancouver's impoverished Downtown Eastside neighborhood.

Vancouver DTES, 2021–22, is one of Fassler's most ambitious projects. The area of its focus, one of the city's oldest districts, was home to a vibrant, socially engaged working-class community until as recently as the 1970s. Over the years, however, the opioid crisis and a shortage of affordable housing led to increases in homelessness, crime, sex trade, and drug addiction. Fassler's quadriptych pencil drawing, nearly twelve feet long, depicts an overhead view of a roughly eight-by-six-block area. The groundwork is a light pencil sketch of the area's streets and buildings, which Fassler has overlaid with dense textual commentaries. In a departure from the artist's usual approach, *Vancouver DTES* does not include any firsthand observations. At the time of Fassler's field study, in 2021, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic had plunged the neighborhood into such a distressed state that loitering there felt unsafe.

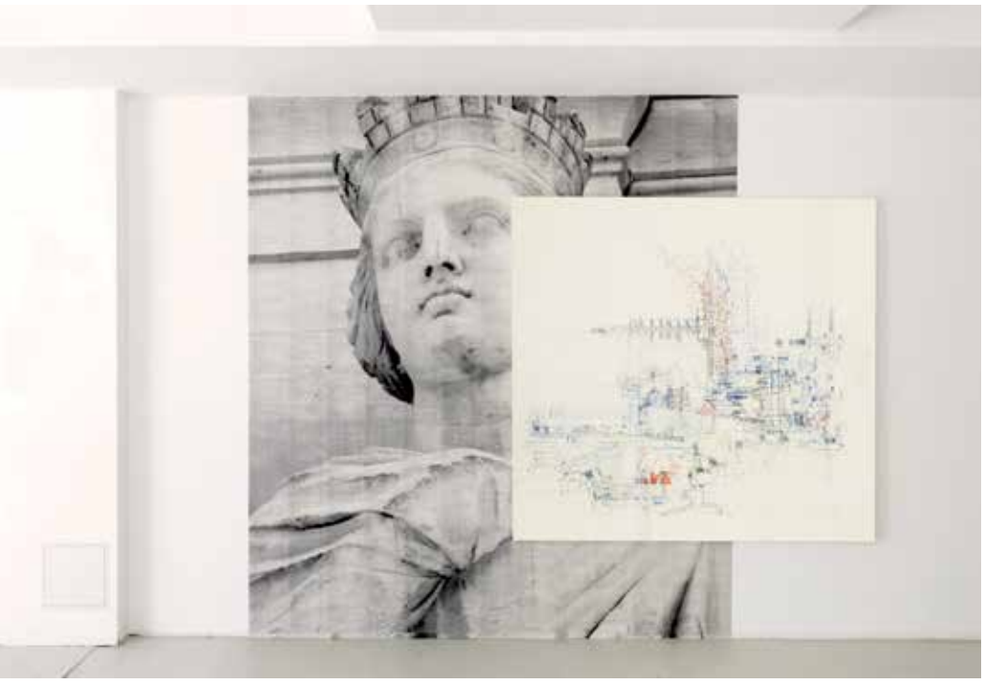
Much of *Vancouver DTES* was therefore created in the studio, where Fassler researched the neighborhood's history and pored over action reports by local aid groups and news articles by beat reporters. The results of her research stretch across the four panels. Newspaper headlines describe the deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities and the privatization of SROs. Google Maps–style "pins" show locations of new "fine dining" restaurants, while a DTES Central Kitchen logo indicates where social service organizations provide free meals. Another logo, PHS, identifies affordable housing and contrasts with a line graph charting Vancouver's rising real estate prices between 2005 and 2021. Bringing in historical layers, Fassler's notes reference the Expo '86 world's fair and the 2010 Olympics, both of which led to evictions and to the criminalization of poor and homeless communities. The unusual lack of human presence in the drawing led Fassler to make a companion series, using an entirely new medium. The "Vancouver Glass Objects," 2023, comprise

five cloudy white-and-brownish handblown glass sculptures shaped and punctured by rusty metal armatures. Giving form to breath and sickly in appearance, these sculptures capture the vulnerability of the DTES community.

This past fall, *Vancouver DTES*, the "Vancouver Glass Objects," and more than a dozen other works were on view at Germany's Kunsthalle Lingen. "Building Worlds," Fassler's most comprehensive show to date, was conceptualized as an extension of her practice. Working with Meike Behm, the director and curator at Lingen, Fassler transformed the skylighted industrial space into a meta-mapping project, integrating studies revealing the peculiarities of diverse urban spaces into a holistic topography. Because Fassler's finished works are so deeply connected to their sites—specifically, to the dirt and din of urban hubs—encountering them in white-cuhe exhibition spaces can be jarring. While the artist initially balked at Behm's suggestion of eggplant-painted walls, which felt too regal for her more rugged style and subject matter, in the end she embraced purple as an appropriately sensitive chromatic link between the disparate locations she tends to render using lots of red and blue pen and paint. In addition to the painted walls, the show's scenography included pedestals, platforms, floor graphics, benches, and curtains. Evoking what it might feel like to inhabit one of Fassler's drawings or paintings, this multilevel and multitextured mise-en-scène emphasized how architecture, decor, and signage affect our experience of space and place.

Even viewers who have never visited the locations Fassler depicts will find them somewhat familiar. Their relatablity is owing in part to visual and conceptual connections the artist makes between urban spaces and the human body. In drawings from the "Place de la Concorde" series, 2011–17, thin red and blue lines trace the flow of people through the titular plaza. The colors and fluid forms the artist uses to record foot traffic evoke the circulation of blood through the body. The thrum of life in this central Paris square is further underscored by handwritten notes. Quoting posters and banners observed during various protests that marched through the Place de la Concorde over the course of her weeks-long field study, Fassler integrates such phrases as *TOUCHE PAS À MA FRANCE* (Don't touch my France), WE ARE ANONYMOUS, *AGRICULTEURS SURTAXES* = *CHÔMAGE ASSURÉ* (Overtaxed farmers = Guaranteed unemployment), and HOMOPHOBES! into the landscape. While aptly capturing a specific mood, place, and activity, the "Place de la Concorde" drawings also convey a universal sense of élan vital. The drawings' vitality is rooted in their subject (the bloody past of the Place de la Concorde, which was the main location of the guillotine during the French Revolution) and expressed in the artist's corporeal drafting style, whereby she relates actions in the plaza to our own lifeblood.

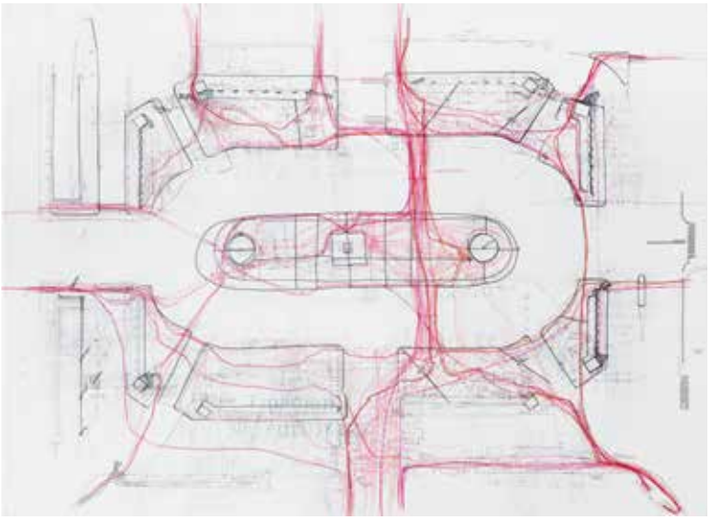
An urgent here-and-now quality to Fassler's work makes the when, where, and how it is exhibited integral to its interpretation. When her "Gare du Nord" paintings, 2014–15, were first shown in Paris, in a 2016 show titled "Worlds Inside" at Galerie Poggi, Fassler hung these interior studies of the station, revealing all its chaos and cacophony, against a wallpaper of enlarged black-and-white photos showing parts of the station's exterior, specifically several Neoclassical allegorical female statues representing different towns served by the original railway. The superimposition highlighted a disconnect between the idealism of modern train travel in the nineteenth century and the station's actual ambience. The real-life backdrop for the exhibition, however, was France's ever-worsening migrant crisis. During the time that Fassler's "Gare du Nord" was on view, the news was dominated by reports from a far less glamorous French transit hub—Calais (a port city on France's northern coast), where an encampment dubbed "the jungle" acted as a dismal temporary home for thousands of refugees from Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq, and other countries as they awaited entry into the UK. In this context, Fassler's depiction of Europe's largest train station as home to MAN BEGGING/ASKING/PLEADING/CRYING FOR MONEY FOR A COFFEE. SEEMS IN DESPAIR. (*Gare du Nord II*) and WHITE BRITISH FAMILY BESIDE ME GOING TO DISNEYLAND (*Gare du Nord III*), both 2014–15, spoke urgently to vast inequities when it comes to border crossing. At Gare du Nord, Eurostar patrons pass through UK/France border control and go on to enjoy their work or leisure time in Paris while crossing paths with a class of undocumented migrants who do not have the same luxury of international travel. Like most of Fassler's work, "Gare du Nord" is political



Left: **Larissa Fassler, *Gare du Nord I*, 2015**, pen, pencil, and paint on canvas. Installation view, Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris, 2016. From the series "Gare du Nord," 2014–15. Photo: Nicolas Brasseur.

Below: **Larissa Fassler, *Place de la Concorde IX*, 2017**, pen and pencil on paper, 54⅜ × 75⅝". From the series "Place de la Concorde," 2011–17.

Opposite page: **Larissa Fassler, *Columbus Circle, NYC II*, 2017–20**, pen, pencil, and acrylic on canvas, 70⅞ × 51⅛".



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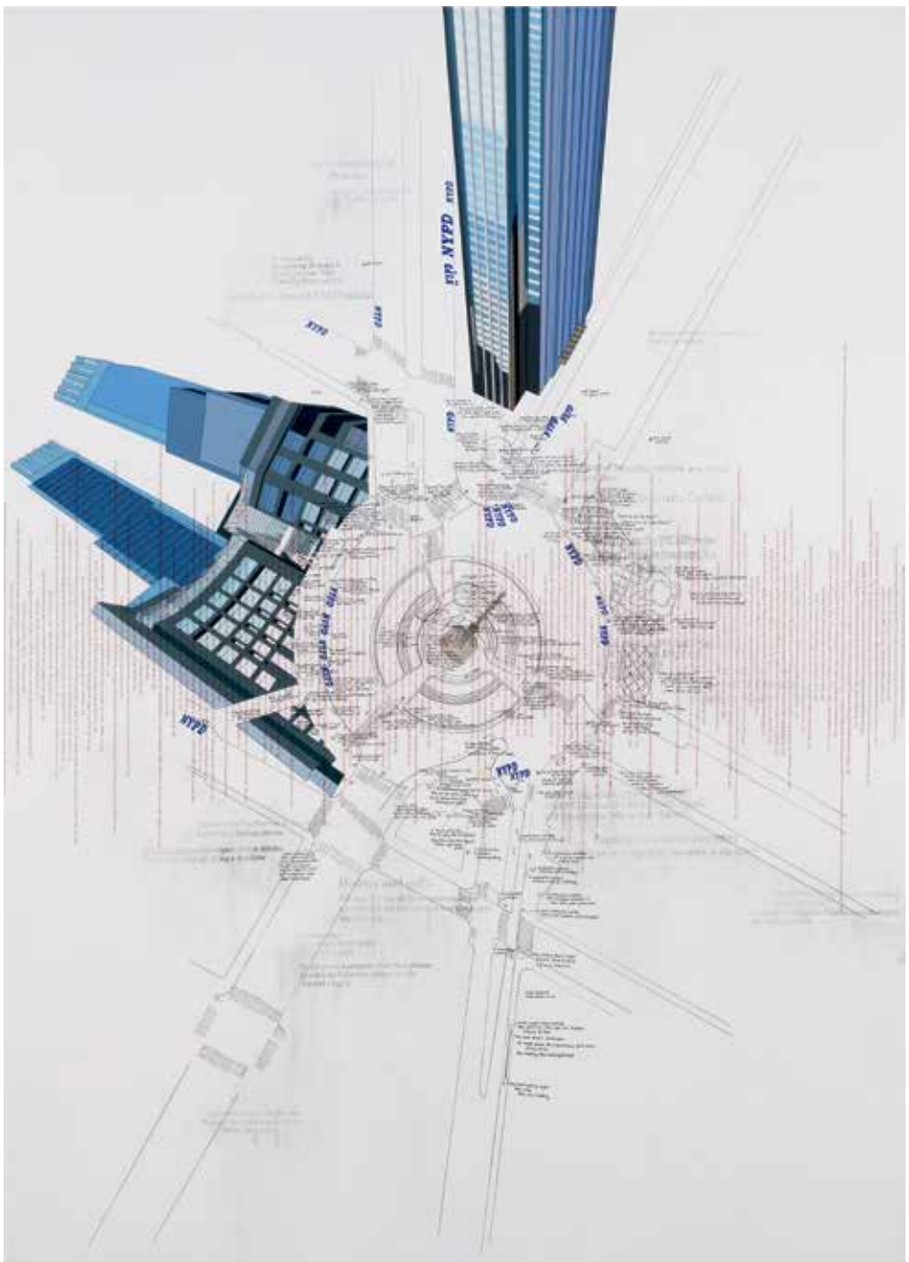

without pointing fingers or making demands. Inasmuch as her exhibition was "about" the immigration crisis, it likely resonated just as strongly with those in favor of curbing immigration as with those condemning the government's inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. The stark contrast between well-heeled travelers and beggars in the "Gare du Nord" drawings is incendiary, but not insurrectionary. More akin to a journalist than to an op-ed columnist, Fassler reports the facts and lets her sources speak for themselves.

The pendent works *Columbus Circle, NYC I* and *II*, both 2017–20, also describe a nation divided. Here the underlying image is a sweeping, but somewhat rudimentary, aerial view of the Christopher Columbus statue at the southwest corner of New York's Central Park, where it is ringed concentrically by a pedestrian plaza, a traffic circle, and two high-rise towers. Across the nearly six-foot-tall *Columbus Circle, NYC II*, small *x* marks and annotations in black pen indicate observations from a two-week field study in 2017. These notes describe sounds (INCREDIBLY LOUD BLAST OF A TAXI HORN), physical descriptions (OLDER BLACK WOMAN TALKING TO HERSELF WEARING HOUSE SLIPPERS), and social interactions (5 CONSTRUCTION WORKERS SITTING, HAVING LUNCH IN THE SUN). Written larger, in blue pen, NYPD logos appear nineteen times throughout the drawing, indicating sites where police officers were stationed.

Another layer of text speaks directly to this heavy police presence and broadens the context beyond this particular urban plaza. Fassler's Columbus Circle field study coincided with a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, specifically calls from citizens and politicians to remove statues commemorating the Civil War or otherwise associated with racial injustice. To address this, Fassler made a timeline of events in US history between 1892 (when the statue of Columbus was installed) and 2020 (by which time, according to CBS News, more than thirty Christopher Columbus statues had been, or were in the process of being, removed). The chronology is handwritten, in red pen, across the entire composition of *Columbus Circle, NYC II*.

The events in Fassler's timeline relate to freedoms (denied and protected) and discrimination (applied and fought against). Her nonexhaustive account of the battle for equal rights in America includes more than one hundred laws, court rulings, murders, assassinations, books, films, protests, and riots. The two final entries in the timeline reference Donald Trump:

> 2020: President Trump tweets that painting Black Lives Matter on street would be a "symbol of hate."
>
> 2020: President Trump issues an order to purge the federal government of racial sensitivity training that his White House called "divisive, anti-American propaganda."

Trump's outsize presence in this scene is incarnated by the Trump International Hotel and Tower, which Fassler boldly painted in shades of black and blue. Looming over the plaza, street, and statue below, the Goliath extends beyond the frame of the painting, serving as a reminder that the future is yet unknown. As studies of how places are reshaped (physically, psychologically, and sociologically) over extended periods of time, Fassler's works are themselves time capsules. Acknowledging that her brackets can only cover so much terrain, the artist directs our gaze beyond the artwork and back to life. □

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