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A Sculpture Stretches the Tension Between Construction and Destruction

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Ari Akkermans | 2 days ago



Pierre-Etienne Morelle, "Exploded View" (2016), installation view, wood, ratchet straps, handles, glass, rubber, brass (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

MILAN — The small basement is less a white cube and more a kind of temporary site, but it's still a gallery, one of the youngest such spaces in central Milan. Upon entering, one is confronted immediately with a strange and massive structure that doesn't seem to begin or end anywhere. Pierre-Etienne Morelle's "Exploded View" (2016) could easily be mistaken for a sculpture, but upon closer inspection, it is not an arrangement with or around a central body, and it doesn't even seem to have a gravitational pull or internal syntax. The elements in this anti-composition have almost fallen out of time, and they are about to break apart, or at least to disjoin. Any kind of arrangement of form and mass could be considered sculptural, from broken mirrors to wooden planks to streams of water, but the difference here lies in the fact that the creative force behind Morelle's structure is not an act of construction, but rather the simultaneity between construction and destruction. It's called performance.

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This is a paradoxical idea. How can materials be performed? We are not talking about ritualistic objects or bodily fluids or raw materials; these are finished objects — wood, ratchet straps, handles, glass, rubber, brass. It would have made sense if the materials had been performed *with*, but how does one “perform” a material in absentia? The answer is: by testing the limits of tension between spatial bodies. How far can they withstand the weight, misplacement, and asymmetry of arrangement? The artists has irradiated his material with

a fundamental instability that is almost chemical: Particles can sustain the pressure only at the expense of being transformed into new structures. Rubber has been, for a long time, the raw material of a number of Morelle's performances, in which he has relied on nothing but the unpredictability of the body and its capacity to adapt to change quickly. In this installation, rubber is still the primary source of tension, yet at the same time, it is the only support.

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Pierre-Étienne Morelle, "Packed" (2014), oak and rubber, 42 x 42 x 4cm (photo courtesy of Loom Gallery)

As the centerpiece of *Tenseness*, the artist's first solo exhibition in Italy, "Exploded View" is significant in the way that Morelle remains committed to what he has previously called "predicted failure," or a situation in

which he creates “extreme situations that cannot be easily maintained.” Yet there is a sense of contradiction between the ambition to stage situations of risk through gestures performed on the material — which is both stretched and juxtaposed — and the rigid formalism that is present throughout the artist’s work. You can see in other pieces in the show, including “Dismantling” (2015), “Remains II” (2015), and “Packed” (2014), the kind of functional relationship that the artist has developed with his element: rubber as a side-effect of mastery, so that works that are born from the action of constant stretching and expanding, or stretching and collapsing, become almost painterly, contemplative objects, abstracted from the world of tensions and disequilibrium.

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It is perhaps there, in the transfiguration of naked materiality, that the work is strongest. These are not paintings or framed objects, the oak and the glass and the clamps; everything is part of the artwork. The result of this increasing tension is an implosion, or a kind of negative creation through which velocity acquiesces into inertia. Morelle’s clear minimalism could pass for apolitical (and the word “politics” is of no import here, except when we understand that “the works examine the relations and tensions arising between the given space and the bodies,” so that perception of space becomes another element inside of the work) because the formal structure of the work is more grounded in phenomena and conditions than in historical experience. The

conditions of change and instability, not as a commentary on politics but rather as a normative description of the experience of the modern subject, form the heart of this exhibition.

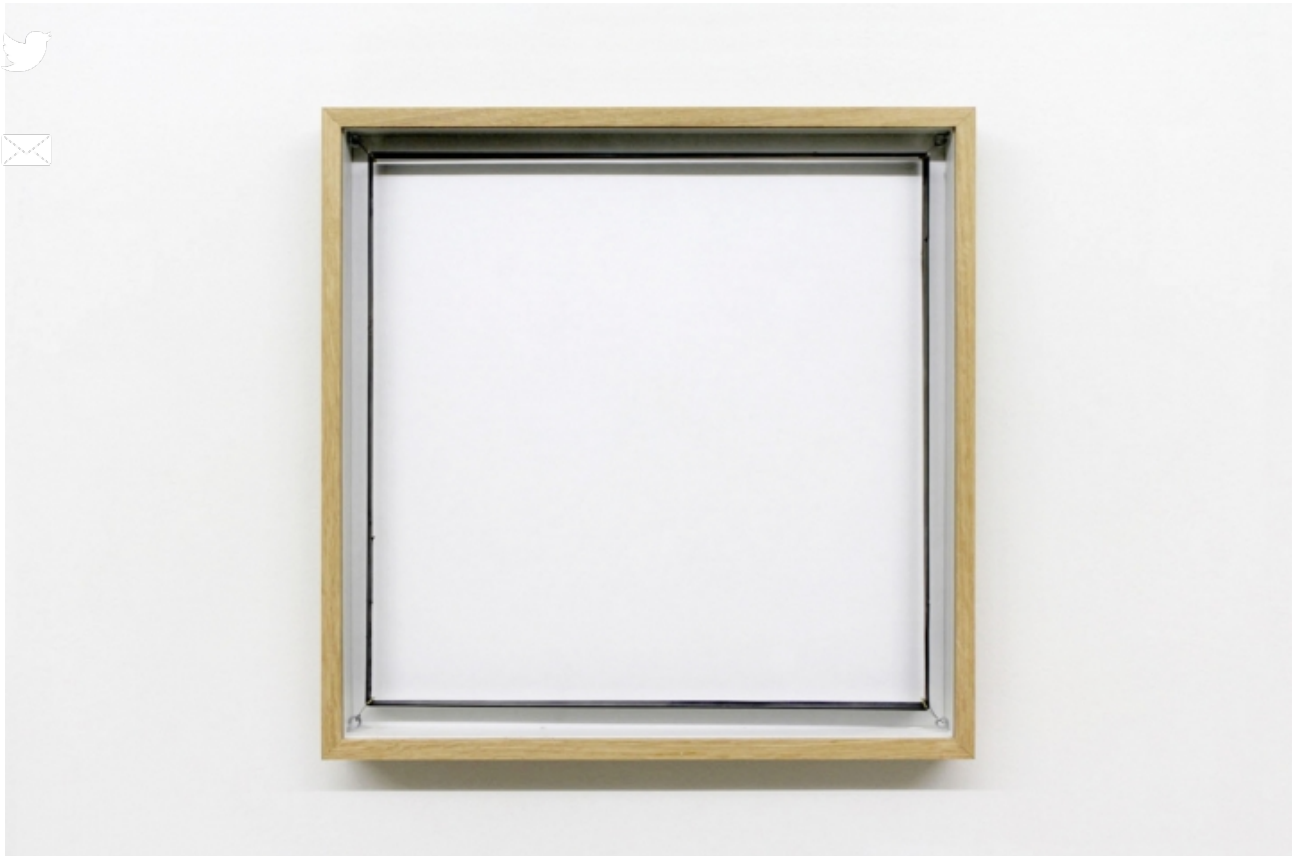


Pierre-Étienne Morelle, "Loose" (2014), oak and rubber, 42 x 42 x 4cm (photo courtesy of Loom Gallery)

Nevertheless, Morelle's exhibition premise — taking the deconstruction of the concept of the white-cube gallery as a starting point — seems somewhat misleading, not only because the exhibition seems rather traditional, but also because reducing the performative nature of the objects and materials in the show to a reflection on "art about art" dovetails with the ability of *Tenseness* and its centerpiece installation to speak of a much broader world. A world in which the predictability of risk as an

analytical model helps us make sense of the logic of modernity (and whatever comes after it) as an operational field in which risk becomes quantifiable while remaining non-objective, and is therefore deployed to create uncertainty and expand the now all-too-commonplace notion of “emergency” Yet Morelle’s “Exploded View” achieves precisely that: conjuring up the dynamics of risk to the point of almost collapse. And that’s the key — almost.

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Pierre-Étienne Morelle, “Tight framed o1 (square)” (2014), oak and rubber, 42 x 42 x 4cm (photo courtesy of Loom Gallery)

[Tenseness](#) continues at Loom Gallery (Via Marsala 7, Milan) through January 30.

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