

HESSE FLATOW

Chamberlain, Colby. "Alina Tenser." Artforum. Online and Print. May, 2022.

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Alina Tenser, *Container for Utterance, яю* (detail), 2022, vinyl, zipper, steel rods, concrete, dimensions variable.

Alina Tenser

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The work of Alina Tenser inhabits a notional space at the juncture of a Montessori school and the Container Store. Her sculptures, performances, and videos suggest playtime scenarios of experiential learning while evoking a distinctly grown-up predilection for organizing. Though children may view the

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"useful pot to put things in" that Winnie the Pooh presents to Eeyore as a lackluster birthday gift, the right storage device can excite the passions of adults (or at least "adulting" millennials) in ways that Marx's theory of the commodity fails to fully comprehend. Tenser seeks to activate the psychic energies latent in the trays, bins, hangers, clips, and doodads that promise not merely to discipline a spice cabinet or tidy a desk drawer but also to stabilize and even renew one's fundamental sense of self.

Consider Tenser's *Container for Utterance, vacant, wine* (all works cited, 2022). Made from transparent PVC plastic, Plexiglas rods, and a red zipper, this wall piece resembles one of those collapsible shoe racks designed to hang from the rear of closet doors. Five interior segments are visible but remain inaccessible, since the rectilinear structure is sealed shut by the zipper, which takes a zigzagging route across its outer surface, prompting viewers to imagine undoing the zipper until the vinyl loses its form and sinks into a crinkly heap. A work of this nature variously brings to mind the specific object (e.g., Donald Judd's modular compositions of industrial materials), the nonobject (Lygia Clark's multifaceted invitations to intersubjective encounter), the Surrealist object (Meret Oppenheim's items substituting everyday utility for uncanny intimation), the comradely object (Varvara Stepanova's commercial goods intended to orient consumers away from capitalist social relations), or the Flux object (George Maciunas's deliberately dysfunctional variations on domestic wares), as well as psychoanalytic concepts such as the transitional object (D. W. Winnicott's comforting accessories that aid an infant's recognition of the divide between "me" and "not me"). Tenser herself has expressed an interest in affordances (James J. Gibson's cues for action embedded within a material environment), and the title of her exhibition, "A Particular Kind of Embrace," borrows from a phrase found in the first volume of Silvan Tomkins's *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962): "If you like to feel enclosed within a claustrum and I like to put my arms around you, we can both enjoy a particular kind of embrace."

The works presented here amount-ed to what we might call a displaced biography—or rather a biography of displacement. Several additional "Container for Utterance" sculptures from 2020 and 2021 surrounded or abutted blocks of concrete cast in the shape of Cyrillic letterforms that Tenser associates with her childhood experiences of relocating from Ukraine to the United States and needing to learn English before she had fully mastered her native Russian. (Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine was launched a week after

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the exhibition opened, forcing onto Tenser's recollections an unwelcome timeliness.) In *_ Container for Utterance*, *_ЯЮ*, two freestanding zipped-up vinyl structures displayed concrete renderings of the letters *Я*, a vowel that translates into English as "I," and *Ю*, which has no fixed meaning in Russian but denotes the sound "u" or "you." Growing up, Tenser confused the phonetic meaning of *Ю* in Cyrillic with its semantic definition in English. The juxtaposition *Я* and *Ю* thus took shape in her mind as the opposition of "I" and "you"—an error in her understanding of "self" and "other" that emerged from the dissonance of living between two linguistic systems.

A second series of sculptures, called "Parentheses," 2021–22, brought together pairs of semicircular six-foot-tall screens of perforated metal interlaced with brightly colored satin ribbon. The screens sat atop caster wheels that allowed for easy movement, reminiscent of the mobile dividing walls in Herman Miller's proto-cubicle *Action Office*. In English grammar, parentheses refer to statements that serve as addendums to otherwise complete sentences, as well as to the curved typographic marks that set them apart (which I have relied on here to assist me in sorting through the complexity of Tenser's work). What is the particular kind of embrace that parentheses afford? Do they guard against impulses that threaten coherence, or do they seal off undesirable impurities? Perhaps parentheses cluster around particulars so singular that we cannot bear to lose them, no matter how awkward the fit. So, instead, we hold them tight.

— Colby Chamberlain