



Peter Gorsen

### **“Remaining Serious Is Successful Repression” (Sandor Ferenci)**

Pornographic or obscene jokes and dirty language have long, as we know, been a male domain. Men’s jokes are found amusing, but the “woman’s joke” has yet to acquire an equivalent social position and indeed, under patriarchal conditions, will only be able to gain a subversive, outsider role. As Freud rightly observed of our culture, jokes of a dirty, pornographic, always tendentious nature are “levelled originally at women”. The joker appears chiefly as the attacker, whilst the woman appears more conservative, mainly as the object of the attack. She is the object and the man the subject of a sexual stripping bare and an aggression which, above all, generates lust. The desire to see what is sexual laid bare is for Freud the original motive behind jokes and dirty language. They serve the “satisfaction of a (lascivious) drive”, in the face of “its cultural repression”. Jokes and dirty language provide the individual with an outlet against the culturally dominant denial of lust and subsequent psychological pressure. In contrast to his general cultural theory of sublimation, Freud (in his work “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious”, 1905) identified jokes and dirty language positively as a means of reversing the repression and censorship of sexuality in our culture and so win back what has been lost.

Those who do not master the art of the (dirty) joke or who spurn it, also limit themselves in their expression of lust. This is the case for the female members of our society in an unequally high proportion to the male. The cultural process of sexual repression may affect both men and women, but, as the lack or rather complete absence of women’s jokes shows, it is mainly women who are the bearers and victims of this general repression.

Renate Bertlmann belongs to those artists whose work, in the context of these reflections, earns, or rather provokes, our particular attention. Her antipornographic objects and montages cause laughter – but not at first, if at all, from men, for here without exception men become for once the objects of the sexual stripping bare and aggression. Here the leopard is given the opportunity to learn to change its spots: for men to set aside their wounded pride and let themselves be disarmed by this unfamiliar “women’s joke”.

In view of the many phallic caricatures, the unerringly accurate satires of male narcissism and fantasies of omnipotence, the question arises as to whether Renate Bertlmann has not conquered a new terrain; one which enables women to answer the lustful aggression of men with an equally lustful retort. The artist leads the way by creating montages of objects and images which are wholly disrespectful and expose self confident virile genitality, where nothing remains of what Freud identified in his time as the culturally valuable, sensitive “inability of women to endure explicit sexuality”. Bertlmann’s “Präservativwurfmesser” (“Condom throwing knife”), her catapult in the form of two penis shafts, her cartridge belt decorated with stuffed condoms, her votive picture “Reliquie des Heiligen Erectus” (“Relic of the Holy Erectus”): all of these works are a double declaration of war against the pornographic violence of men and the male privilege of lust in patriarchal society.

As a general rule women react entirely passively, mutedly, expressionlessly, to the offensive jokes of men. Typically they react with the kind of martyr behaviour culturally intended for them as female objects, which is to look away with indignation or embarrassment and withdraw from the scene of obscene provocation. Renate Bertlmann makes a feminist protest against this withdrawal, but also, as an artist, she provides this protest with a humorous outlet so that it does not merely remain at the abstract level, hidden in theoretical and moral arguments.

In the caricatures, which take aim at figures of authority within our inescapable male society and reduce the manager, the cleric, the military commander, the old greying figures of eminence and religious prophets as well as their whole brood of sons and heirs to a common phallic denominator, there is alongside the accusation and criticism also a pointed humour to be found, a sense of enjoyment, a healthy sadism in handing it out. This double-edged approach to the caricatures is what makes them palatable artistically and distinct from feminist rhetoric. In the extent to which caricature in Bertlmann's work closes in upon its object, the male and his sphere, fear of it diminishes accordingly, and the repression and censorship of female lust is reversed. It is this liberating element which is decisive, not the appropriation of male aggression, which reproduces the ubiquitous men's joke and in the same obscene coin pays back what has been dealt out to women.

The new terrain which Renate Bertlmann has opened up for the "women's joke" in closed male society does not try to compete with crude, violent and basically humourless pornography. This is assured by the poetic alienation with which the artist takes apart and reassembles in new ways the artifacts and relics of male lust, in particular the imposing, grandly decorative torture instrumentarium which her expanded condom collection becomes. No man can endure this rearrangement. The conflation of a "Männerschwanz" ("dick") and a butterfly (in "Diverse Farphalle Impudiche"), the "men's protection" inflated to a balloon or drying on a washing line ("Der Waschttag" / "Washing Day"), textured condoms, bizarre in themselves, arranged into colourful artificial flowers and stylised as little hands or cock's heads ("Fleurs du Mal") – all these material montages, and the way in which they appeal to the viewer's desire to touch, destroy the false status of virile ambition for power. These varied caricatures twist men's arrogant sexual prestige into metaphors of their failure. But they also disarm in terms of the goal which usually awaits women behind the male strategy of advances and 'encouraging' jokes: deadly serious, sweaty coitus.

*Translation: Larissa Cox*