

Out of the incubator over the chest to the bride and back revisions to Renate Bertlmann's work.

Upon entering her studio one gets a Déjà vu-effect: in the Sixties there were the so-called „Stores“ American Pop and happening artist - I think of Carolee Schneemann, but also Claes Oldenburg. Also a suspicious factor arises: is Renate Bertlmann still too American in her early work, because the resonance and demand of galleries and arts centers are too small in Vienna? Indeed and unjustly she was not celebrated such as younger artists like Carola Dertnig as the „Mother of Invention“ of feminist performance art.

But the Austrian art scene is slow-acting, harsh, it rarely changes and Renate Bertlmann's works had still touched on two other points very early on, which are connected with one another: ambivalence and kitsch. These methods up until a few years ago were practically not or only hardly embodied in the Austrian art scene. That is, there are many tendencies, which arose in her work decades earlier, which were not written into the history of art in part due to the unheard manner and ephemeral character of the performance. Also contributing alongside her often use of ambivalence the „breaking the leitmotif“ and the gift of the revision.

One of her tactics thereby is to make lustful cute embarrasses from pornographic implements, bride dresses, pacifiers, hearts, and garden gnomes. The art theorist faction often homogenized by conceptual thinking sees in these tools the trivial as an enemy of its actual pictorial refusal and takes panic-stricken flight. It could be possible, the trinity for their work blocks - pornographies, irony and utopia to describe- with a title, selected by the artist, like „St(r)ammhalter im Bru(s)tkasten“ .Just like what Louise Bourgeois's loved, in Robert Mapplethorpe's photos with an under the arm carried sculptural penis, „La Fillette“, also Bertlmann answered the gaffe of the female „penis envy“ - among other things -, stirred up by Sigmund Freud, with shrill doll dresses pulled over the dildo from the porno shop, and above all extra large black ones. Or the large cock wrapped like a mummy and put into a showcase replacing the incubator: „Corpus impudicum arte domitum“. Subversively on the offensive taboo borders „are Bourgeois and Bertlmann common like often the questions about identities, achieved by disguising or transformation, perversion and deconstruction, whereby female stories do not address themselves accusing to an opposite - thus the male view „of the different one“ is included in principle as social criticism.

A typical American feature is the interactive communication with the audience, which were included in her performances right from the beginning. This means that Bertlmann not only uses her body as a screen (projection surface) of female identity and enters the room with her body and with malleable work partially consisting of relics, but that her performances are rather like „happenings“. The visitors and people of the audience were actively integrated in the process in a stronger way than by the male representatives of the „Wiener Aktionismus“ as they had to throw money into a collection bag, or had to shoot at parts of the art piece, dance or push a wheel chair. They had to actively participate. Not only did Bertlmann perform together with international colleagues of the performance scene at festivals in Bologna, Amsterdam and Vienna, but her encounters with Gina Pane and Ulay/Abramovic left such a mark on her work, while leading „Aktionismus“ into the direction of an international development. The Viennese specialties such as injury and concealment are shared only between her, Rudolf Schwarzkogler and Rita Furrer. However, some views she displays differ from the rest, such as her humorous aspect and what more is the interaction of music, language, the use of teaching boards, sketches as well as the photographic and film documentation – just as most young artists do - right from the beginning. In the 70's she co-

founded the “BC – collective“ with Linda Christanell as an early teamwork of two women to ensure these interactions. Mutual filming with Super – 8 cameras allowed for documentation of their ephemeral work, whereas the objects, which are made of textile, wood, latex, etc. that are used here could also stand for themselves in installation photos. Therefore there are more possible variations of their “tender loving care“ presented on chairs or hanging from string to show a kind of “laundry (wash) day“ for the artistically manifested taboos.

The audience could actually get into physical contact with these taboos as they were manifested into palpable art objects. They are composed of latex castings and either Schnullermatten or Präservativschnüren and carry the task of pointing out, as an overflowing suitcase full of embarrassments, the ambiguous forces of Eros and the taboo objectified cruelties such as rape, incest and cannibalism.

Daily sadomasochistic practices such as shooting at sex puppets with a slingshot in form of a forked penis, which was used in the in the 1980 New York performance of “sling shot action“ or the more complex piece “Knife – throwing bride“ in 1978 were converted into the radically artistic “execution“. Similar actions were Niki de St. Phalle’s rifle shots at the “Tir“ installations, which were often peppered with Christian symbols, or Chris Burden’s automatic shot apparatus. With the cutting of the textile panels for “Deflorazione in 14 stazioni“ in Bologna’s modern museum, one is reminded of the early “cutting actions“ of Lucio Fontana or the in the 50’s parallel performed jumps through paper panels, by Saburo Murakami from the Japanese Gutai group. The weeping pimple strings from Bertlmann’s “Urvagina“ spoke of these same contents a decade before Kiki Smith’s birth and menstruation iconography. This topic was once again a violation of the taboo threshold und this also didn’t cause comfortable associations with the audience. They both put their topics and the method of direct revelation early into cross-examination of both female and male sides just as the usage of erotic prosthesis for men. She had to realize that not only the men, but also the women persevered their trivial myths of wedding, baby carriage and single family house, in which these “helpers“, also in the form of art subjects, were, in any form, not to be seen but rather remain locked away in secret drawers.

Many had been preoccupied with their reactions of aversion as she then stretched the contraceptives around knife blades, graters and other tools of a private torture chamber or the in the 19th century so readily feared “vagina dadata“. Because she makes the subject of embarrassment and kitsch so pleasurable, it is difficult to make one’s way into the art market with such a critical form of art. In childhood deeply rooted desires and the in Vienna domiciled psychoanalysis are also possible reasons, in Bertlmann’s opinion, for aggression and violence in society, especially when the disappointment or the disciplinary action fail through the rules of the dominant middle class family structures and only remain a shelter for neuroses. Criminal cases in Austria, which even incited prime ministers to act in the nation’s defense, although they were recently sickened by the disclosure of incrustated patriarchal structures, show how close she already was in the last decades, with that, to the tragic pull of time. At the same time the artist attacks the theologians with her work and the accompanying texts, by appealing to cardinals, as dressed dildos, for more tenderness, for more togetherness and true solidarity instead of shrouded language.

Naturally, the veil and virginity have often concerned her, before these became political themes of a new Europe, as the multicultural views of the 70’s died down in terror and the murder of sisters in honor. She used scarves in performances for photography cycles, which had inscriptions such as: “Behind every desire waits death and threatens with a skeletal finger: rejection.“ She broaches the idea of the protection within and without, also the protection of

the body from its commercialization as an advertising surface, one of the many focal subjects of the 70's and therefore an essential point of discussion in the "IntAkt" artist group.

Social structures have gained, particularly in the last few years, even broader space in the work of Renate Bertlmann: films and photo cycles about migrants or photos by a poet, who writes about traumatization. Film and photo workshops, the organizing of symposia and their publications are various aspects of teamwork she enjoys with younger artists such as Andrea Kalteis, whom she dedicated an entire cycle, "associations", to. Just as the phases of teaching do, she uses the discussion with other than reflection phases, for the renewed material classification and reorientation. The initially radically achieved feminism has, for her also, reached the third phase in its development, which has made some revisions necessary.

Although the performers in the 70's in Vienna have opened art to the discourse with new medias, with space and also with new and unusual material, this is hardly known today. However, the close relationship to the American happenings or the mix of language game of minimalism and the conceptual art as well as partially opulent objects will gain meaning. The subversive bride iconography remains, from Hanna Höch to Renate Bertlmann, an essential answer for one of Marcel Duchamp's main pieces "the big glass" or "the bride nakedly exposed by her bachelors", the artist even tries, in many of her "Ready made's", to unmask the intellectual masculinity of the protagonist to be one-sided. Without the inclusion of the psyche, the Meta layer is the artwork with life. This is where she finds herself near Joseph Beuys.

The thereby prior essential quest of a specific feminine aesthetics in the 70's, which seemed justifiable, given the male dominated art scene, is very often forgotten and even suppressed by the artists themselves, since the queer and transgender debates seemed more tolerant than the tendency of mirroring a gender through his heterosexual opposite. Nevertheless, the historical aspect must always be considered, which quite increases the importance of their artistic messages. To Hanna Höch's collage like cutting of the brides Bertlmann adds the technical x-ray photo, which previously has already been used by Man Ray and Meret Oppenheim and later by mainly Jürgen Klauke. Klauke's dark irony and gender switch have also been conducive in the decision for the photo, as tableau of a sorority, in Bertlmann's photo sequence "Rene ou Renée" from 1980. Kitchen objects such as the talking "cheese cover", also to be used for artistic content, they play with the "Trompe l'oeil – thought" of the baroque era, to the present pornographic gnomes or "forbidden fruits" on pedestals.

The object of desire of the kitschy snow globe is naturally just as indispensable as the various heart iconography and children's toys, which, upon closer observation, have emerged to become a handicapped persons remedy. This enticed the younger colleagues such as Anna Jermolaewa or the Odradek siblings to do their own photo and video work, which also has assumed the latent aggression, though softened it with humor. The artist's sentence, about the newest work groups, "In the meantime I have become more peaceful" doesn't necessarily have to be signed, as it is probably an alternation of humor from ribald to subtle, that has already been noticed in her photo books since 2001. Since 2008 I have been a carrier of Renate Bertlmann's "Zoo Guide", which is a honorary membership in her fan community, visible as a key chain, made of multiple layers of plastic, which can also be worn like a necklace. I, however, cannot yet give an answer, as into which art zoo the journey will lead.

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