

Magdalena Felice

Love & Sex

Renate Bertlmann's Art in the 1970s

The call for self-determination and liberation from constraints that was voiced in all spheres of life by women in the 1970s made no exception of art. At issue was mainly the image of the female in art, which up to then had been—with a few exceptions—an image of women made by men. And the issue was to develop a female image, made by women, which did not yet exist. The search for adequate artistic expression of these demands and the new female self-conception went hand in hand with introspection and the exploration of what this image might be, and of what it might be like. It was the disclosure of societal conditions and constraints, the deconstruction of traditional image concepts, questions of identity, the exploration of one's own body and sexuality, and the demand for control over them that informed the search for formal and contentual possibilities outside of and beyond the established patriarchal forms of representation.

Renate Bertlmann numbers among the most consistent of the Austrian women artists who took this path in the 1970s. Her work revolves around the subjects of love, eroticism, and sexuality. She casts light on the innermost realms of the female psyche, making them public and placing them in a social context. From a distinctly female perspective, she represents feelings and desires, addresses the battle of the sexes, unmasks society as being informed by a type of male-determined, fetish-obsessed sexuality, and assumes different female and male roles to trace and explore different identities. The range of subject matter in her work is characterized by ambivalence: tenderness stands alongside aggression, lasciviousness alongside asceticism, the feminine alongside the masculine, and the dead serious and profound alongside a revealing and occasionally biting humor. And at times, the one switches into, or merges with, the other.

The artist creates parallel groups of works which highlight various aspects of a subject, and the consistent iconography that thus emerges lets her oeuvre grow into a coherent and increasingly complex system. Drawings are made alongside objects which she reuses for staged photographs and performances.

One central group of works from the 1970s is her “tender-poetic” pieces. There, the artist

develops abstracted and reduced shapes representing affectionate experiences of a tender corporeality. In her 1974 drawings entitled *Berührungen* [*Touches*], gently shaded outlines form organic shapes, shapes which touch and embrace each other. Renate Bertlmann finds an equivalent to them in the form of inflated condoms and latex teats. Through the way in which they are used, through the gaze being purposefully directed towards the soft materiality of the surface, and through the works' titles, these objects become synonyms of tenderness. The fact that these drawings belong to the spheres of both the sexual and the infantile adds to their abstract quality, evoking associations of sexuality, contraception, motherhood, and childhood experiences. The period beginning in 1975 saw the creation of a large number of teat and condom works: inflated condoms positioned in light contact with one another in glass cases, including instructions for re-inflating in case they should "go limp"; teat mats and objects with pushed-in and protruding rubber nipples that can be read as female or male genitals; the photo series and film *Zärtliche Berührungen* [*Tender Touches*] showing the inflated ends of two condoms caressing and eventually penetrating each other; *Zärtliche Hände* [*Tender Hands*], a *Zärtlicher Christus* [*Tender Christ*] wearing a crown of latex nipples; the first series of staged photographs, *Zärtliche Pantomime* [*Tender Pantomime*], showing the masked artist intimately absorbed in herself and her sexuality. At the same time, Renate Bertlmann combines teats and condoms with scalpels in other drawings and objects, thereby creating images of repudiation and aggressive self-defense in light of the vulnerability of tender intimacy and with regard to images of aggressive sexuality.

In another group of works, Renate Bertlmann explores societal aspects of sexuality and the relations between the sexes. Examining assigned roles and constraints that men and women are subject to, she shows marriage to be a central element in this structure. In a series of colored-pencil collages and drawings from 1974/75, the artist introduces the image of the female mostly as a pregnant bride in a white dress and veil and the image of the male as the bridegroom. In the colored-pencil collages which mark the onset of that revealingly ironic humor which particularly characterized of Bertlmann's pornographic phallic works of the 1980s, she shows the guests of a festive party reduced to phalli, denouncing society at large as phallogocentric and advancing a female interpretation to counter the female penis envy posited by Sigmund Freud. Also belonging in this context is the cartridge belt developed in 1976, which transforms a tool belt into a military belt equipped with fancy condoms. From the socially critical play *Ein Fest für Boris* [*A Party for Boris*] by Thomas Bernhard she borrows the motif of the legless cripples and wheelchairs for further drawings, objects and performances, with the

wheelchair being readable both as a societal corset or as an assistive device for individuals who have been reduced to their prescribed role. The representations culminate in the 1978 performance *Die schwangere Braut im Rollstuhl* [*The Pregnant Bride in the Wheelchair*], which ends with the masked bride—who has just given birth to a crying bundle—dashing out of the chair and getting away.

From 1977 finally, Renate Bertlmann created several sequences of staged, black-and-white photographs in which she plays several different roles, as well as pieces in which she deals with self-denial and sorrow. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the photo series *Renée ou René*, in which the artist acts out masculinely connoted attitudes and actions including masturbation and rape, and the sculpture with the tomb and the gravestone bearing the inscription “Hier ruht meine Zärtlichkeit” [“Here rests my tenderness”], which is mentioned here as just one of many other works.

To this day, Renate Bertlmann’s art has continued along the path which she decided to take back in the 1970s. In the 1980s, her works became more direct, more ironic, more lavish and colorful, incorporating an increasing amount of kitsch elements and direct references to pornography. Her photography developed progressively into a superordinate medium which the artist also uses to rework older pieces, and which has provided the working material for her more tranquil photo films of recent years.

What distinguishes Renate Bertlmann from other feminist artists of the 1970s is the fact that, from the very beginning, she has not confined herself to a female-created female image. She also works on a female-created image of the masculine and of gender relations in society, taking on masculine roles and, with her teats and condoms, often blurring—despite her fundamentally heterosexual orientation—boundaries of gender and sexuality. As early as the 1970s, she foreshadowed demands and issues raised later on by the third-wave feminism of the 1990s. At the time, this drew frequent criticism from radical feminists, who instead called for concentration solely on the feminine. From today’s perspective, however, this is what gives her position a special significance.