Renate Bertlmann
Exo-subject: sculpture and surface as identity

Awkwardly grasping a rounded belly with bony fingers, extended and exaggerated in length by latex teats, we witness the uncanny spectre of Renate Bertlmann's photographic self-portrait, *Pregnant Bride*, 1976. The bride's white net veil is crowned not by a wreath of spring blossoms, but by a ring of the same, oddly shaped, man-made protuberances. She wears a long white dress, but where we expect to see her blushing beauty, there is the blank plane of a crude mask: a white shape with rudimentary facial features glued onto it; unseeing slit eyes, bulbous nose and smaller latex protrusions indicating the position of the mouth. In a ceremonial touch, the outlines of these features are encrusted with different coloured glitters.

Choosing a heteronormative social ritual, and its associated values to do with virginity and promised – but traditionally withheld - fertility, the artist deliberately pulls some triggers in this piece. As well as the push and pull between traditional costume, and brutal disruption thereof, the figure's posture is at odds with her theme. Instead of standing or sitting poised and upright, she appears slumped, perhaps asleep, in a wheelchair: a pose that suggests she may not be able to move independently. Coupled with the masking of her face, and despite the appearance of premature pregnancy, this pose further effects confusion between whether the subject of this photo-portrait is animate or inanimate. For the live performance by the same name, 1978, [location]. Bertlmann's presence dressed thus invoked disturbance, even horror. In this work, the feminine archetype, rather than being prepared in typical fashion for the marital ceremony, is recast through surreal substitutions and extensions that render her apparently unnatural: technologies and prosthetics extending or propping up her human shape in ways that positioned her between life and death, between real flesh and man-made supports. The figure of the bride that Bertlman presents appears simultaneously monstrous and futuristically evolved. Is she automata or corpse? To whom is she due to be in union, and how does she procreate? If indeed we can identify her as 'she'? The signifiers of her subjectivity and her social role are deliberately disrupted. At the end of the performance, the bride, by all accounts somewhat shockingly for the audience, abandons her 'newborn baby'.

The Pregnant Bride was one of a number of self-portrait images captured by Bertelman in the 1970s. Typically, in her work in this period, the artist plays upon archetypes and expectations using her own appearance as material, combined with masks, costumes and prostheses: both found, and of her own making. She addresses not only the performance of femininity, or maternity, but also people's awkwardness in light of non-normative behaviours or appearances, including disability, and investigates the intersubjective balances at play in asserting power, or plying seduction and intimacy, often with a healthy dose of irony. Bertlmann made the self-portrait photographs as part of a practice that also included the making of line drawings of anthropomorphic forms such as her Stele series, 1974, in which worm-like shapes are rendered, entwined with each other, or with simple drawn blocks, and also object-sculptures. In the latter, the artist introduces a lexicon of body-substitutes that she alternately wears and presents in the gallery. *The Malformed Humans of Tomorrow*, 1975, for example, comprises a set of small shelves that display a taxonomy of her found objects and plastic shapes: a set of pacifiers and bottle teats in different shapes and sizes: some bulbous, some elongated, some fat, some with a blunted tip. Sometimes these dummies are sliced or deflated in the display. These objects – akin to the condoms that frequently appear in her work - present as a curious set of possibilities for sucking or drinking or stopping-up the mouth: as soft material interfaces to extend, or prevent, contact between humans. The

display forms a kind of bassline or key to understanding the origin of those shapes and forms that recur throughout her work.

Between those sculptures presented discretely as objects and the wearable forms that Bertlmann makes, we begin to recognise this vocabulary of rubber and latex materials as forms of 'second skin'. Even when presented independently, her body of sculpture grows as a multi-part membrane modelled on and designed to sheath or extend the human form, to be compatible with it. In her photographs of Protrusions, we see the artist wrapping her large-scale latex sheet, cast with multiple, regularly spaced protuberances around her own head and body: substituting these abstract, repeat forms for where her facial features should be. In Urvagina, 1978, we see a photograph of the artist with a box between her open legs, bearing a crudely cut slit from which reams of latex strips indented with small bulbous protrusions spill out as a material manifestation of sexual ecstasy. These materials, suggestive of the body and yet visible – through Bertlmann's eyes – as surreal excesses that might, also, be disturbingly detached from our 'real' skin and flesh, are utilised in combination with more straightforward explorations of the masculine and feminine in performances based on clothing or 'drag': Rene or Renee is a series in which the artist appears in a men's suit. In Rene or Renee: Rape, 1977, she molests a female mannequin lying on a table, removing her clothes with sinister implication; in Masturbation, 1977, she appears thus, specifically as though self-pleasuring and experiencing orgasm.

Jessica Morgan has written convincingly about the way in which Bertlemann repeatedly performs the phallus to the point of deflation, as a strategy of critique towards phallocentrism. This is indeed true on one level, and the phallic shape of the condom appears literally inflated with anthropomorphic character in many works, including the series Tender Touches, 1976, in which their coloured, latex tips appear to perform an intimate embrace: an image which is simultaneously erotic and comic. Moreoever, the casting and peeling of her alternately penis and breast shaped latex prophylactic shapes, and nipple-like teats, as sculptural skins, resonates with the appearance of the 'eccentric abstraction' of Eva Hesse: theorised by Lucy Lippard as an organic counterpoint to the hard-edged logic of masculine minimalism. Berltmann cites the importance of Luce Irigaray's The Sex Which is Not One, and Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex as formative influences in this conversation about gendered language. But what is clear, tracing through Bertlmann's many guises, and the objects she selects from the world of readymades that represent an extreme probing of boundaries between what is human and what is man-made - is that her project fundamentally disturbs the foundations of how we infer her subjectivity, her humanity. Gender – though visible as a theme - is but one facet of this investigation.

Bertlmann's guises represent no coy study of the many faces of femininity (a la Cindy Sherman Film Stills and beyond), and no straightforward play on female-male drag (thinking of Eleanor Antin, in the same period, carefully applying a beard). Bertlmann's vision intersects with, but is – at its core - out of synch, also, with the so-called Transformer generation of mostly male artists playing with gender identify as a masquerading surface to do with inhabiting pre-assigned societal roles or expectations. Her lineage might, more helpfully, be linked to the exuberant and irreverent creations of 1980s artist and fashion designer, Leigh Bowery: where the notion of drag is elaborated to the point of sculptural ensemble, but also an explicit form of armour. In her use of industrially produced objects, there are resonances also with the metal and plastic costumes designed for the mechanical ballets of Oskar Schemmer, or the dolls of Hans Bellmer. Bertlmann's project seems to be concerned with the question of the human as an adaptive creature, in an increasingly

technologized environment, above and beyond being a man or woman. She conjures images that propose a subjectivity beyond those binaries, inhabiting its own terms. In fact, a person whose very shape and form bear an unstable relation to that apparent order of enlightenment "nature", and might even be built upon a fundamental sense of disunity in which one's appearance as a whole subject remains provisional and constructed, and on the brink of failure.

Alongside the costumes she makes and inhabits, which augment and alter her physical appearance, and her capacity to move or act, Bertlmann proposes a world of things that might be utilised, substituted, worn, played with in order for us – as humans – to negotiate our relationship to the changing world we find ourselves in. What is more, there is a creeping sense that in their simulation of human body parts, in their subtle insistence on adaptability to human skin and contours, in their capacity to permit or block relations, those things might become a part of us, or, even, ultimately, take on a life of their own, and render us useless. In Breast Incubator, 1984, two wax breasts, pink tipped and with spiked razor blades emerging erect from their nipples, are presented in a vitrine atop a moveable plinth that resembles a hospital trolley. It's a joke, on one hand, with two holes where one might be tempted to put one's hands to feel them, and bear the bloody consequences. But it's also emblematic of Bertlmann's play with body parts and extensions: wearable extras as enhancement, as in the artist's performance Deflowering in 14 Stations, 1977 in which she attaches the Knife Breasts to her body as costume and weapon simultaneously. The sense of human agency as a fundamental core in terms of meaning and direction, or of a natural order, is disturbed, and in these implied encounters, it is fallible human flesh that appears fragile against her material constructions and their apparently evolved functions.

Bertlmann creates a series of masquerading exo-skeletons from objects or materials designed as adaptations to or extensions of the human body, and in doing so, she creates images of a human subject that speak to a future that was some decades beyond the moment in which she began working. Bertlmann, in her Tender Pantomimes, 1976, and related works, appears as a prefiguration of the enhanced capacities of the trans-human; a rudimentary cyborg, after the term by theorist Donna Haraway, whose self-built surface is intimately – often erotically - connected to the things around her: the electric lightbulbs, the plastic mattress, the power socket in the wall. These works push towards an image of a kind of alien-human, or trans-human recognizable to our post-internet times in their suggestion that the body is simply a fleshly substrate upon which techno-adaptations, prosthetic elaborations can be added. In this sense, Bertlmann intuits some decades before the 'post-internet' generation, the psychological structure of a reality in which one's internal reality becomes an outward flow, expression becomes thinking: a twenty-first century phenomenon in which the subconscious is not deep inside, but is continuously streamed as surface. We do not long to look into Bertelmann's soul for the truth; she performs it at the level of her exterior: showing horror and tenderness in equal measure. Her adaptation, extension, intimacy with the world of things; of tools, of connective materials challenges our perception of her human core in ways that appear, in fact, beyond exo-skeleton to be a manifestation of exo-consciousness. And on her surfaces, her sculptures, the repeated shapes appear like the body's cells or microbes enlarged under a microscope, like intestines or the brain. In her Wupperthal installation of 1982, her latex casts of repeat protruberances suspended on washing lines resembles internal organs, blanched and hung out to dry.

It is instructive to compare the moment at which Bertlmann tests the limits and extensions of her physical being this way to a counterpoint in performance practice: the generation that

went before her under the banner of 'Aktionism' in Vienna (Nitsch, Brus et al) but also fellow female artists such as Gina Pane, Letitia Parrente or Ana Mendieta. It is illuminating to think of what Bertlmann's incorporation of plastics, dummy-body-parts, simulation represents in relation to those artists who treated human flesh as an indexical marker of authentic experience, of pain as a ground zero, even if in theatrical and affective ways. Bertlman, in contrast, manifests no such investment in the primary authenticity of the flesh. But neither is she content to play with surface as a shallow depth in her performance. Her part-plastic bodily reality is also serious.

The writing of trans theorist Susan Stryker resonates with Bertlmann's approach to the constructed body as an authentic, evolving bassline of contemporary subjectivity. Stryker speaks of her "egalitarian relationship with non-human material" and of her relationship, as a trans-woman, to the notion of the "Monster". "Monster", she writes "is derived from the Latin noun monstrum, "divine portent," itself formed on the root of the verb monere, "to warn." It came to refer to living things of anomalous shape or structure, or to fabulous creatures like the sphinx who were composed of strikingly incongruous parts, because the ancients considered the appearance of such beings to be a sign of some impending supernatural event. Monsters, like angels, functioned as messengers and heralds of the extraordinary. they served to announce impending revelation, saying, in effect, "Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening." . Stryker, likens her trans status to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein 1, "The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born", she writes. But indeed calling us all (her readers) to find the "seams and sutures" in ourselves (p.246)

Bertlmann has said she wants to create alternate 'attraction and repulsion, 'anger and tenderness' in her work. And in her own, created monstrousness, her own adaptive enhancement, Bertlmann appears in these works, and surrounded by these object-tools, as an equivalent to what Stryker says about the trans-sexual figure: a kind of messenger. Her masks and costumes render her as a shamanic figure – a figure who traditionally occupies a liminal, ritual space between life and death, or between childhood and adulthood. Her costumes sometimes coincidentally resemble, for example, those made for traditional Igbo or Benin masquerading rituals enacted in African communities. In her work Hokus Fokus, 1977, the artist literally appears as a magician: in black top hat, leopardskin scarf and a cape, hands either side of a white plaster bust of a head as though performing an act of divination. Bertlmann's universe of costumes and props, whose mutated, adapted, stitched-together appearance made of real and substituted body-parts, announces the future human. That she does so with rudimentary means is evidence of her vision: a vision that leads the artist working in this pre web 2.0, pre photoshop period. Like the new organs, nozzles, connectors, nodes that her sculptural objects resemble, she invents herself as a conduit, intimating her out-of-placeness, out-of-time.

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p.245 Stryker: Frankenstein, Transgender Reader, Routledge.

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist.

Going beyond challenging the binary of masculine and feminine, Bertlmann creates a third, or even fourth space in which apparent biological givens are already shifting through the possibilities of extensions, protections, prosthetics, substitutions; phalluses and nipples. There is a fluidity in the work between costume and skin, a sense that body parts can be added at will, or even combined in relation to one's flesh; multiplied, and worn in places where they are not expected. The proliferation of symbols that connote the binaries of sexed identity become entangled, visibly identical, often, in her vision, with the body's interior organs, and tip over towards a machinic, industrial or mass-produced code. There is a suggestion that the artist could replicate this 'self', not through biological means, but through such repetitions of fabrication. The same stuff that builds her subjectivity as armour, costume, performance, play, that spills from her inside, and adorns her outside is the stuff that connects all of us to each other, and to the things we have created. As Stryker notes, we are creat-ures as well as creators, and created. Bertlmann's making of art is deeply bound up with what we see on the surface of her self-making.

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