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Reimann, Sandra Beate. "How Rebecca Horn expanded the boundaries of the human body." *Art Basel Stories*. June 2019.

Art | Basel



Rebecca Horn's work is both brave and touching. With humanity at its very core – including its feelings, desires, and fears – her creations are simultaneously personal and universal. Yet her 50-year oeuvre is also remarkably multi-faceted: ranging from performances which utilize body instruments, to feature films, drawings, poems, and kinetic sculptures, right up to site-specific installations. Horn's work is a growing web of objects and themes, which are combined and recombined while making frequent references to artistic, literary, and film traditions, and even mythology and fairy tales. In Horn's symbolically charged cosmos, reality and fiction merge and flow together.

Born in Michelstadt, Odenwald, in 1944, the artist studied at Hamburg's University of Fine Arts from 1963 to 1970. Though she began by utilizing polyester in her works, Horn started building bodily extensions from textiles and feathers after being confined to a sanatorium (an excruciating experience necessitated by a lung disease). In 1972 her work was exhibited at documenta 5 by Harald Szeemann, the first curator to show her work. Horn moved to New York in the early 1970s and spent the following years between the American metropolis and Berlin.

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Rebecca Horn, Weisser Körperfächer, 1972. Photo Rebecca Horn Collection. © 2019: Rebecca Horn/ ProLitteris, Zurich.

Exploring the boundaries of the human body, her performances with prosthetics took place in front of a camera and a small circle of collaborators. Actions such as walking upright, balancing a pole, and opening wings were enacted in individual, isolated movements, while Horn choreographed the motions of the performers alongside the processes of veiling and unveiling.

The films created from her performances do more than simply document them – each is narratively structured and contains symbolic motifs. In 1978, as her interest in film widened, Horn shot her first feature-length work, *The Gigolo* in her New York studio. This was followed by *La Ferdinanda* in 1981, which was filmed in a Medici mansion, and then *Buster's Bedroom* in 1990, as an ode to the slapstick actor Buster Keaton, whom she admired. In these films, special roles were assigned to objects including hatpins, ostrich eggs, and small hammers. For the first time, Horn used machines as actors: yet these protagonists, trapped in mechanical, repetitive actions, were freed from their very status as mere objects by their frenetic activity. After appearing in Horn's films, these actor-objects were presented as kinetic sculptures in various installations. Detached from the film, they began to tell stories of their own.

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Rebecca Horn, Überströmer, 1970. Tate Collection, London. © 2019: Rebecca Horn/ ProLitteris, Zurich.

Stand-alone kinetic objects were created from 1982 onwards. These moving objects became Horn's main form of artistic expression in the years to come, and they shape her work to this day: trembling spoons touch one other, suitcases flutter, rifles take aim, and rhinoceroses meet with an electric kiss. However, the focus is not on the machine itself, but on the movements which make the objects appear animate. Emotions in particular, as movements of the mind, are conveyed with fine mechanical precision. Horn composes different types of motion and rhythm while also taking accompanying noises into account, thereby allowing the objects to relate to one another, as well as to the viewer.

After her return from the US, Horn dealt with German National Socialism in her site-specific installations at Skulptur Projekte Münster (1987), at the synagogue in Stommeln, Cologne (1998), and in Weimar (1999). All these sites were utilized for their historical dimensions, rather than their architectural and spatial features.

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Rebecca Horn, Berlin - Übungen in neun Stücken: Mit beiden Händen gleichzeitig die Wände berühren, 1974 - 1975, 16 mm (digitized), color, sound. Rebecca Horn Collection. © 2019: Rebecca Horn/ ProLitteris, Zurich.

The artist has lived in Bad König since 1989, where she set up her studio in a former factory site belonging to her family, and renovated its buildings over the course of several years. Horn is considered to be one of the most successful German artists of her generation, standing out thanks to a unique approach rooted in personal experience; she was even honoured by the Guggenheim Museum in New York with a comprehensive retrospective as early as 1993. Her forthright, poetic works remain fascinating to this day, and in Summer 2019 a wide range of her multi-layered pieces can be experienced all over Europe: at Museum Tinguely in Basel, the Centre Pompidou-Metz, and in the Tanks at Tate Modern.

The exhibition 'Rebecca Horn. Body Fantasies' can be seen until September 22, 2019 at Museum Tinguely, and focuses on the transformative processes between body and machine. Performance works are presented alongside her later machine-sculptures, demonstrating the development of movement motifs in the artist's oeuvre: The unfolding and control of wings in wind is shown by *White Body-fan* from 1972; Unfolding movements are also explored in later pieces such as *Hängende Fächer* (*Hanging Fans*, 1982), which is made out of long aluminum rods which open – slowly but purposefully – into an imposing semicircle. When the delicate feathered wheel *Zen der Eule* (*Zen of the Owl*, 2010) gently unfurls and spreads its feathers, the machine's materials transform into a majestic winged creature. The early piece *Overflowing Blood Machine* (1970) focuses on blood circulation in the human body, resonating with the later *El Rio de la Luna* (*The Moon River*, 1992): a conduit system comprised of seven mercury-pumping

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boxes, or 'heart chambers'. The practice of drawing is an inscription of movement, a theme which can be found in both Rebecca Horn's actions and kinetic sculptures: Bleistiftmaske (Pencil Mask) from 1972, transforms the body of the artist into a rhythmic drawing machine. Horn went on to create painting machines such as Les Amants (The Lovers, 1991), which spreads paint over the walls and floors. The agile finger extensions of Finger Gloves (1972) connect to her later pieces involving typewriters.

The Basel exhibition – her first major solo exhibition in Switzerland for over 30 years – is arranged as a sequence of stories based on four themes: flapping wings, circulating, inscribing, and touching. More than 50 artworks are exhibited, tracing the evolution of her work along 'stations in a process of transformation' (Rebecca Horn) and highlighting its continuity. The exhibition includes outstanding pieces on loan, as well as extensive installations which connect to the museum building itself. It is an invitation to rediscover Rebecca Horn's opus, which has spread over the years like a living, pulsing web.

Dr. Sandra Beate Reimann is curator at Museum Tinguely, and has curated the current exhibition, 'Rebecca Horn. Körperphantasien' ('Rebecca Horn. Body Fantasies').

'Rebecca Horn. Körperphantasien' is on view at the Museum Tinguely from June 5 until September 22nd, 2019. She is represented by Sean Kelly, Galerie Alice Pauli, and Galerie Thomas Schulte. She will show several short films (1970 – 1973) as part of the short film program 'Collective Mythologies' at the Stadtkino Basel on June 12th. Further information can be found [here](#).