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art on paper

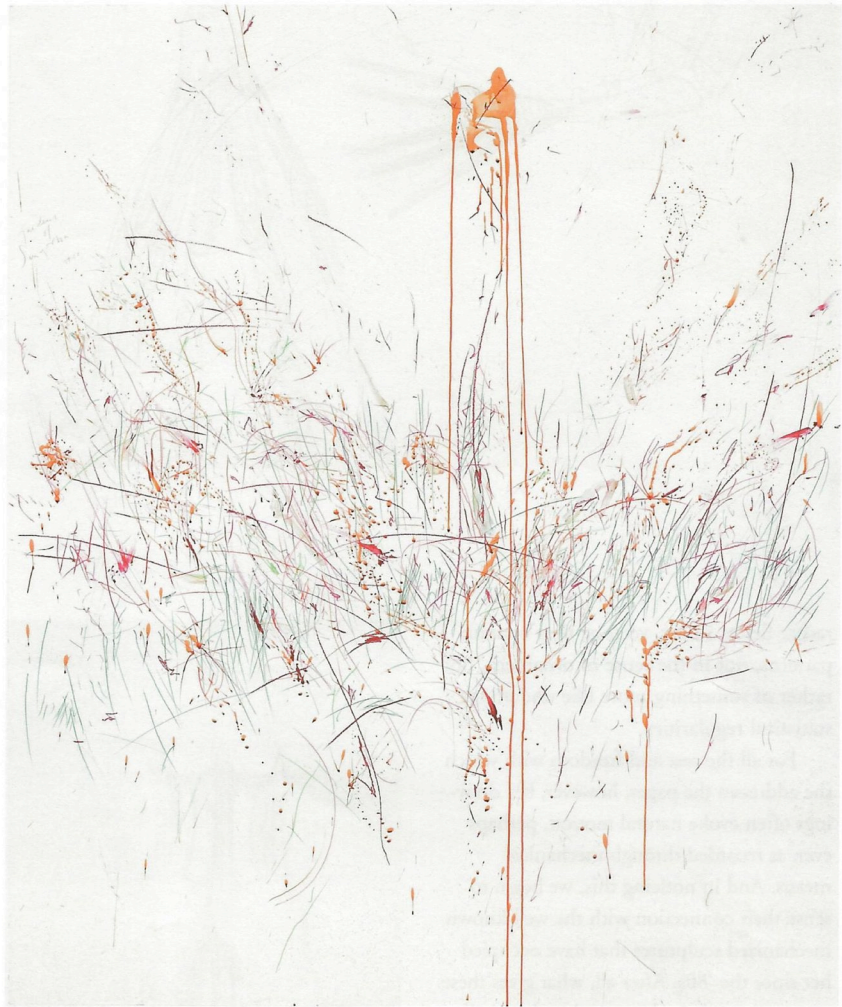
Natural Tendencies in Rebecca Horn's Drawings

Rebecca Horn makes machines that seem to possess aspirations of being human—to create, to express, to desire—and it would perhaps be arbitrary to decide whether they touch us more in their failure or in their near-success. She is widely known for these works; much less so for her drawings. A revealing retrospective (recently on view at the Hayward Gallery, London) offered the opportunity to see her work on paper in context with her sculpture as well as early performance-based films and videos.

Horn's early drawings, dating between 1965 and 1968 (when she was in her early twenties) address the female body. In some of the work, she has approached it metonymically by way of its clothing (*Kleid*, 1966), in others metaphorically (*Ohne Titel [Frauenbaum]*, 1966), but often Horn represents the body directly, as a sort of fragmented sculptural fabrication, though a powerful and dynamic one. These are not, however, preparatory drawings for sculpture; they are images that could exist only in the imagination.

In contrast, drawings dated between 1968 and 1971 are studies for props and costumes for performances. Katharina Schmidt, in her informative catalogue essay for the show, refers to them as "Hospital Drawings," explaining that they were made during and just after Horn's hospitalization for tuberculosis in 1968–69. They are more notational, less self-contained, but for all that, express a real urgency. Here, we witness Horn's conception of those strange extensions of the body that would figure in her performance works—headgear pointed up like an antenna at the sky, gloves that prolong the fingers to the length of the arm itself.

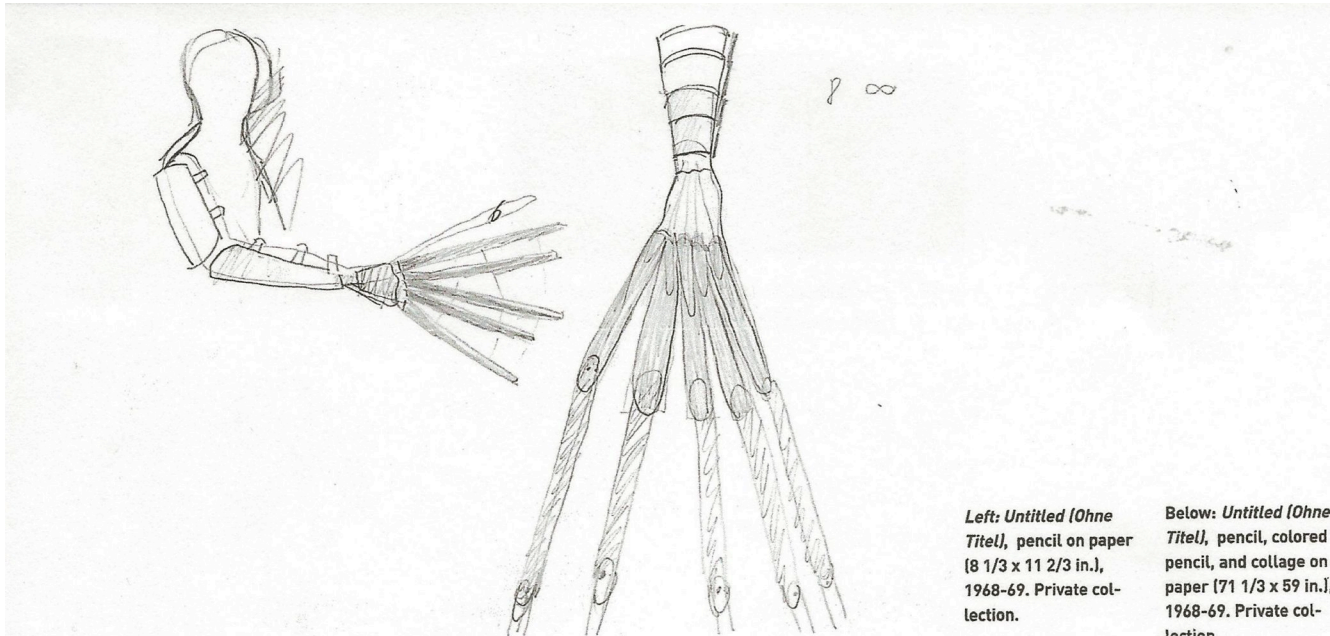
Her drawings since the late '80s are unrecognizable as the work of the same artist. (The catalogue mentions that "Horn



The Burning Gardens of Smyrna 1922 (Die brennenden Gärten von Smyrna 1922), pencil, color pen, acrylic, inks and Carmigniano on paper (71 x 59 in.), 2004. Private collection.

lost a large quantity of drawings in New York in the early 1980s, where she lived between 1972 and 1981.) In these mature drawings, the body is no longer a depicted motif but rather the dynamic agent. They are gestural in nature, often showing a clear affinity with the work of Cy Twombly. Spidery, sometimes agitated lines prolifer-

ate across the sheet, never covering it very densely and always allowing its expectant blankness to remain in evidence. There is little distinction between handwriting and drawing, and likewise pure abstraction shades into either rudimentary figuration or diagram. These drawings do not describe forms, figures, or objects, but

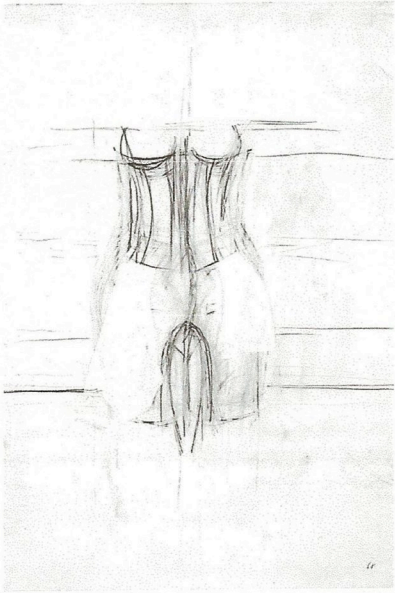


Left: *Untitled (Ohne Titel)*, pencil on paper (8 1/3 x 11 2/3 in.), 1968-69. Private collection.

Below: *Untitled (Ohne Titel)*, pencil, colored pencil, and collage on paper (71 1/3 x 59 in.) 1968-69. Private collection.

rather fields, forces, vectors; they contain patterns, not in the sense of ornament, but rather of something more like underlying statistical regularities.

For all the zest and freedom with which she addresses the paper, however, her drawings often evoke natural motion, perhaps even as recorded through mechanical means. And in noticing this, we begin to sense their connection with the well-known mechanized sculptures that have occupied her since the '80s. After all, what gives these contraptions their charm is that their jerky yet touching movements seem surprisingly human. They are filled with hesitation, uncertainty, impetuosity, and so on, as if filled with "all the disorders that consciousness could produce in the natural grace of mankind"—quoting Kleist's famous essay on the marionette theater, which they partially refute. And just as Horn continually rediscovers the human within the mechanical, so in her drawings she discloses the mechanical within the human. "The body ~~has~~ *has* out its antennae in a broad sweep," she



says, and of course the antennae may be those of an insect or a machine—organic or automated.

The sculptures themselves are drawing machines of a sort. *Les Amants* (1991)

splashes black ink and Champagne on the wall. In *Book of Ashes* (2002), a golden spear appears to have drawn a sequence of lines in a layer of ash deposited on the surface of a mirror on the floor—although as long as I looked at it, and on more than one occasion, I never actually saw the spear succeed in touching the surface it was aimed at. At least I could see that in *Heartshadows für Pessoa, Cinéma Vérité* (2002-05), a similar spike really was disturbing the pool of water atop its mirror to draw ever-changing patterns of reflections on the adjacent wall—intangible, transitory drawings not unlike the ones that Horn has captured for us on paper. But they are also like the one that the artist prophesied in her 1988 text "Art Circus," when she wrote of a "silvery heron . . . dipping his beak into the mercury bath to draw a new temperature-curve in the sky." ■