

SEAN KELLY

Maerkle, Andrew. "Rediscovering Rebecca Horn," *The Japan Times*, November 20, 2009.

The Japan Times

Rediscovering Rebecca Horn



Sharp words: Rebecca Horn's 'Knuggle Dome for James Joyce' (2004) is made of four pairs of kitchen knives that have been inscribed to read 'L-O-V-E' and 'H-A-T-E' across the blades. | GUNTER LEPKOWSKI PHOTO, 2009, © REBECCA HORN

If you've been paying attention to recent contemporary art, both in Japan and abroad, you might be struck by the question "Why now?" during a visit to German artist Rebecca Horn's survey at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOT), Tokyo.

Entitled "Rebellion in Silence: Dialogue between Raven and Whale," MOT's exhibition is the first large-scale presentation of Horn's work in Japan, but it falls short of making a statement about where the artist, who made her international debut in 1972 at one of the world's most prestigious exhibitions, *documenta*, stands in the current art landscape. The exhibition is split across two levels of the museum, with third-floor gallery space given mainly to mechanized sculptures combining aspects of figuration and disparate fauna such as seashells and feathers, and ground-floor gallery space devoted to Horn's feature films and performance documentation.

In the third-floor galleries, Horn's sculptural works conjure a hellish freak show of possessed carnival attractions, creating an odd confrontation between B-movie props and the staid white cube of an art institution. Greeting visitors is "Raum der Gegenseitigen Zerstörung" (1992), which consists of two constructions that face each other from opposing sides of a room. Each construction comprises a tall, mirrored panel from which a thin metal rod with a pistol affixed to its end extends at about head high. The constructions confront each other with icy stillness until the pistols, powered by simple motors, suddenly jerk to life, shaking from side to side.



Resembling a crab on its back, “Knuggle Dome for James Joyce” (2004) is made of four pairs of kitchen knives installed on metal “legs” that rise slowly at acute angles to meet each other and then descend to an open position. One set of knives has the letters “L-O-V-E” inscribed in red upon its blades, the other, “H-A-T-E” in black. Similarly, “Liebesflucht, Muschelschlaf,” made this year, features a cast bronze phallus stuck on a thin, curved armature that swings up into the opening of an inverted nautilus shell. The phallus nestles into the shell and remains there for several minutes before briefly retracting and then returning to its original position.

In an expansive room toward the end of the third-floor circuit, “Malmaschine” (1999), a set of tubes and funnels suspended from the ceiling, twists in deranged paroxysms spraying flecks of ink across a once-white wall, while nearby “Concert for Anarchy” (2006), a grand piano suspended from the ceiling upside down, periodically vomits forth its keys with a discordant clamor.

This chaos is broken up by two reveries using light projections and water, the larger of which, “Light Imprisoned in The Belly of a Whale” (2002), features a bank of six projectors circling a long, rectangular basin that is stirred with cursive movements by an automated gilt rod.

Emitted from the projectors, lines of text from an eponymous poem written by Horn bounce across the room and refract off the surface of the pool in a spinning disco-ball effect. As they move, fragments of the poem turn into full passages or passages escape into fragmentation: “Shapes of air, shapes of moon” . . . “In the night words are wandering” . . . “ramifications of gill-wings.” The work upends the linearity of reading and the agency of the author, allowing viewers to create their own poems from Horn’s material.

Cushions placed on the floor make this one of the more inviting rooms of the exhibition, although frequent Horn collaborator Hayden Chisholm’s accompanying score of high-pitched chimes and low rushes of air add an air of new-age mysticism to the environment.

The overall impression here, though, is one of abstraction. Although Horn’s motorized sculptures alternately deliver amusing shocks and the attenuated drama of delayed action, they seem to be missing a vital component, as if they have been sanitized by their tastefully spare exhibition arrangement. The idea of the haunting or possession that they embody never escapes to a truly terrifying or hysterical pitch; never quite manifests a human element.

Yet the sculptures tell only part of the story of this unconventional artist. In 1964, Horn contracted severe lung poisoning from working with glass fiber materials as part of her studies at the University of Fine Arts, Hamburg, resulting in her spending a year in a sanitarium. When she finally resumed art making, Horn was too weak to use hard materials and turned to working with wood and fabric. This experience eventually led her to create a series of works referred to loosely as “body extensions,” fetishistic prostheses that accentuate the body’s sculptural properties and in turn star in a number of early performances and feature-length films that are on view in MOT’s first floor galleries.

It is through these works that visitors can fully experience the weirdness of Horn's vision. Projected at monumental scale, the films are presented on loops spread across four cube-shaped galleries. A casual walk through the screening area can lead to some surreal juxtapositions: a circular, motorized canopy made of ostrich plumage engulfing an adolescent ballerina; Horn herself, balancing a long white plank on her head as she walks across a verdant landscape; Amanda Ooms and Donald Sutherland, who play the protagonists of Horn's 1991 film "Buster's Bedroom," licking each other's faces with serpentine tongue flicks; footage of visitors wandering through an exhibition of Horn's work in a European palace.

Taking time to sit through individual films also provides its own pleasures. Two compilations of early "Performances" that Horn devised for herself and other actors reveal the artist's interest in a kind of slapstick formalism. One performance finds two dancers in a studio, each wearing around one leg an apparatus made of straps and magnets. The magnets snap their legs together, and then the dancers attempt to move as one unit, only for the magnets to snap apart. Another observes a woman, wearing an overcoat made of mirrored slats, as she studies herself in a mirror. Meanwhile "Buster's Bedroom," set in a sanitarium where the comic actor Buster Keaton underwent treatment in the 1930s, plays like an extreme version of a Woody Allen movie in which the characters' neuroses overrun the integrity of the narrative.

Reappearing in a loose documentary about Horn's career, "Cutting the Past," Donald Sutherland describes Horn's work in film as "an elastic or mobile or plastic piece of sculpture." This incisive comment touches upon the disconnect one experiences in the exhibition proper: If Horn's films can be conceived as sculptures, then her sculptures are also made for film. Viewed on their own, they have a baroque quality at odds with the prevailing narrative of contemporary art outlined in exhibitions such as critic Midori Matsui's "The Age of Micropop," held at Art Tower Mito in 2007, or the "unmonumental" attitude outlined in an eponymous exhibition at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art held later that same year. They come across as relics from a distant past or something that is awaiting rediscovery — a new context — in the future. But expressing a subtle nonconformity that triangulates between kitsch, violence, comedy and poetry, they cannot be easily dismissed. And in that sense, now is as good a time as ever.