

SEANKELLY

Ure-Smith, Jane. "We're All in a Flutter About Rebecca Horn." *Frieze*. June 25, 2019

Frieze

Two riveting shows, at Centre Pompidou-Metz and Basel's Museum Tinguely, showcase the 75-year-old German artist's ingenious capacity for invention



Rebecca Horn is cutting her hair, in close up. I sit riveted, ready to duck as she hacks away at her luxurious locks and the scissors move ever closer to her eyeballs. The video nods to the eye-slitting scene in Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), but in its combination of sensuousness, danger and a glint of humour, *Cutting one's hair with two pairs of scissors simultaneously* (1974–5) is quintessential Horn.

When the Centre Pompidou-Metz and Basel's Museum Tinguely discovered they were both planning a show of work by the German artist, now 75, they toyed with the possibility of a single exhibition spread across two spaces, but it was not to be. Instead, two parallel surveys, neither completely chronological, present the artist from different angles.

SEANKELLY



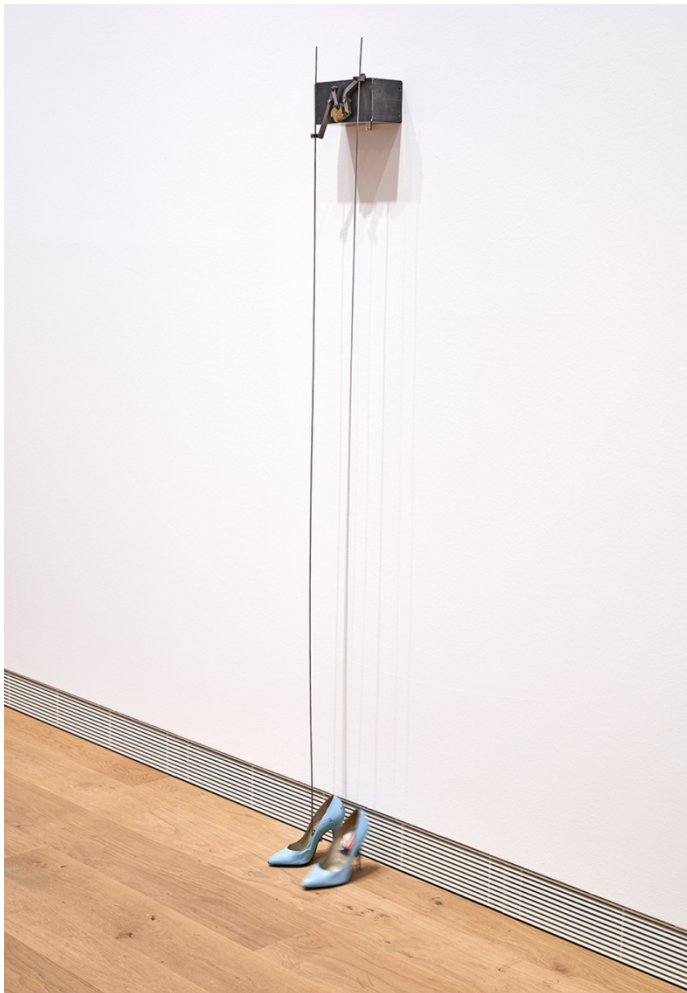
Rebecca Horn, *Zen der Eule (Zen of the Owl)*, 2010, installation view, Museum Tinguely, Basel, 2019. Courtesy: the artist, Museum Tinguely, Basel and ProLitters, Zurich; photograph: Daniel Spehr

Appropriately for a museum showcasing the inspired, dada-influenced kinetic art of Jean Tinguely, *Body Fantasies* puts the emphasis on Horn's equally original machines. Three exquisite works introduce a show in which the artist's early performance art serves as a backdrop to her ingenious creations. The feathery white *Mechanical Peacock Fan* (1981) mimics the bird's mating dance as it rises and falls majestically. A wheel of owl feathers, *Zen der Eule (Zen of the Owl)*, 2010), collapses then regroups, growing pinker and more lovely as the downy quills bunch up at the bottom. And in *Schmetterling im Zenit* (2009), a tiny machine brings to life a dead Blue Morpho

SEANKELLY

butterfly, startling in its blueness. It flaps energetically, but can't escape its cabinet.

Next door, *El Rio de la Luna* (The River of the Moon, 1992) sprawls across the floor. In this huge, body-machine complex – which in itself could serve as a metaphor for her oeuvre – mercury flows like liquid moonlight through glass-topped boxes in a vast network of 'arteries'. In the last room are a pair of dancing stilettos (*American Waltz*, 1990) and a series of ker-chinging typewriters (*La Lune Rebelle*, 1991) that speak of tactile discovery. Don't expect the creaks and groans of a lumbering Tinguely contraption: Horn's delicate machinery sheds light on being human. Each piece moves, but only intermittently. There is time for reflection before each one suddenly springs to life.



Rebecca Horn, American Waltz, 1990, installation view, Museum Tinguely, Basel, 2019. Courtesy: the artist, Museum Tinguely, Basel and ProLitters, Zurich; photograph: Daniel Spehr

Halfway through the show you come to Berlin—*Exercises in Nine Parts* (1974–5), in a room off to one side. Here we see Horn as a performance artist experimenting with the

SEANKELLY

'body extensions' that prefigured her machines. The nine short films touch on ideas the artist developed throughout her career. Vastly elongated 'finger-gloves' enable her to scratch the opposite walls of the room simultaneously, but are equally well suited to messing up a lover's hair or 'walking' down his back like a long-limbed insect. Elsewhere, she abandons the extensions and, à la Joseph Beuys and his coyote, shuts herself in a room with a cockatoo, hoping to engage it in dialogue by imitating its sounds and eye movements.

Cutting one's hair... is one of these *Exercises*, too. As the first thing you see when you emerge from the lift at the Centre Pompidou-Metz, it provides a perfect hinge between the two exhibitions. The Tinguely focuses on her machines, while the Pompidou's *Rebecca Horn: Theatre of Metamorphoses* sets out to explore the artist's oeuvre via the prism of her now little-known feature films and her connections to surrealism. Illuminating surrealist pieces complement Horn's art throughout the show, many of them from her own collection. Sadly, plans for what might have been a retrospective with Horn's full participation came to a halt when she suffered a stroke in 2015. Though not in the best of health, she continues to work.

Horn's three films, *Der Eintänzer* (The Taxi Dancer, 1978), *La Ferdinanda: Sonate für eine Medici-Villa* (La Ferdinanda: Sonata for a Medici Villa, 1981) and *Buster's Bedroom* (1990) – the last dedicated to Buster Keaton – can be watched in their entirety. Excerpts from them are dotted throughout the exhibition, as are works by 'spiritual peers who have nourished her imagination', including Buñuel, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Meret Oppenheim and May Ray as well as the gender-questioning French photographer Claude Cahun.

SEANKELLY



Rebecca Horn, *La Ferdinanda: Sonate für eine Medici-Villa (La Ferdinanda: Sonata for a Medici Villa)*, 1981, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Centre Pompidou-Metz © ADAGP, Paris, 2019

Horn's art was initially shaped by illness. As a young art and philosophy student, she began building polyester and fibreglass sculptures without realising the toxicity of her materials and suffered serious lung poisoning. She spent lonely months in a sanatorium, emerging with a determination to put her body at the centre of her art. In 1972, as the youngest artist included in *Questioning Reality*, Harald Szeemann's documenta 5, she'd paraded a man with a 1.5-metre head extension through a park in Kassel. Two years on, she was well on the way to international recognition.

Spanning five decades, Horn's splendidly strange oeuvre blends fantasy and reality, body and machine, pleasure and pain, human and animal. Birds, beasts and insects fascinate her as they did many surrealists. In *Buster's Bedroom*, an ageing diva keeps a fridge full of butterflies, supposedly the reincarnations of dead lovers. It turns out that the single blue Schmetterling at the Tinguely was a pared down coda to a gorgeous mass of butterflies on a bedframe we see here in Metz (*The Lover's Bed*, 1990). Alongside is Oppenheim's dragonfly wall sculpture *Libellule Campofornio* (1972).

SEANKELLY



Rebecca Horn, *Buster's Bedroom*, 1990, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Centre Pompidou-Metz © ADAGP, Paris, 2019

In Horn's animal explorations, the erotic is never far away, and neither is humour. In the delicious *Hahnenmaske* (Cockfeather Mask, 1973), for instance, the artist wears a feathery black mask to caress the face of a man. In *Federkleid* (Feather Dress, 1972), a man stands helpless in the feather dress of the title, while Horn, a sly grin on her face, pulls strings to raise and lower the feathers like the slats of a venetian blind and reveal his nakedness beneath.

Yet violence is also a constant in Horn's work, either in the form of knives, blades or sharp spikes – or simply the innuendo of a scene. You shudder (or giggle nervously) before a clip from *Buster's Bedroom* in which the hospital-inmate-posing-as-doctor played by a creepy Donald Sutherland fits the film's young heroine with a straitjacket. Beside the screen, a straitjacket (*Memorial Promenade*, 1990) self-inflates at regular intervals, while the girl's recurring cry 'That hurts!' leaks throughout the exhibition space.

In the mid-1970s, Horn moved to New York for a decade, but once back in Germany turned her attention to the country's history. For Sculpture Projects Münster in 1987, she installed *Concert in Reverse* (1987), a sound work evoking the presence of former prisoners in a site of Nazi murder. Such site-specific works can't be repeated but, with the blessing of the artist, the Pompidou has restaged one of two works that Horn installed in Weimar in the late 1990s.

SEANKELLY



Rebecca Horn, Concert for Anarchy, 1990, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Centre Pompidou-Metz © ADAGP, Paris, 2019

SEANKELLY

In addition to *Concert for Buchenwald* (1998), for which the artist piled musical instruments on the tracks of a derelict tram depot to suggest the bodies of those deported to the nearby concentration camp, Horn had staged *Bees' Planetary Map* (1998) in Schloss Ettersburg. The work comprised hollowed-out baskets resembling beehives, circling lights, a shattered mirror, incessant buzzing and a text from Horn: 'The bees have lost their centre / they swarm in dense clouds high above / their luminous basket hives are deserted.'

It alluded then to uprooted people and dislocated lives. The Pompidou now re-presents the piece as a comment on our unstable times. For Emma Lavigne, co-curator of the Metz show, it makes the point that Horn's work may begin with her own body, but is always outward-looking. 'She's strongly connected to reality,' Lavigne says, 'and using surrealism to deal with politics in the same way that Buñuel was.'