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## HYPERALLERGIC

ART

### A Prophet of the Coming Electronic and Mechanical Realities

The Centre Pompidou-Metz and Museum Tinguely have joined together to present a remarkably diverse and prolific two-part exhibition devoted to the German artist Rebecca Horn.



*Installation view of Theatre of Metamorphoses (courtesy Centre Pompidou-Metz)*

METZ, France; BASEL, Switzerland — The Centre Pompidou-Metz and Museum Tinguely have joined together to present a remarkably diverse and prolific two-part exhibition devoted to the German artist Rebecca Horn. Horn's stimulating body of work, begun in the late 1960s, consists of conceptually based, process-oriented, prosthetic performances, numerous films, feathery and kinetic metal sculptures, vast installations, intense, loose drawings, self-documentary performance photographs, and petulant painting machines. Her work often literally or metaphorically inhibits or extends the (usually female) body into space.

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Frequently, component parts of her art can serve as mechanical replacements for the body suggestive of automaton-esque ambitions.

Horn's oeuvre is rich in art-historical connotation while being bound together by a consistent, thematic logic that often includes references to mythical, historical, literary, and spiritual imagery. Sentience through transformative cinematic suggestion is the subject of Theatre of Metamorphoses in Metz, while body-launched machine kinetics is the focus of the non-chronological Body Fantasies show in Basel. When seen together, the two exhibitions make a powerful case for viewing Horn as fairy tale prophetic in her invocations, and richly relevant to current electronic and mechanical realities. Her work imbues our technological world with the animistic sensibility of panpsychism: the view that all matter has a component of flowing qualia.

Another of her grand subjects appears to be unobservable force-field energies and their pressures of attraction and repulsion and circulation that pass through and around the human body. This is perhaps best exemplified with the photograph of the young man wearing her "Overflowing Blood Machine" (1970). This blood flow theme is made encroachingly poignant by the partially debilitating stroke Horn suffered in 2015.



Rebecca Horn, "Overflowing Blood Machine" (1970)  
(Tate Collection, London @ Rebecca Horn/ProLitteris,  
Zürich; courtesy Tinguely Museum)

Walking through the folded structure of Theatre of Metamorphoses, I followed suggested streams of restrained desperation and ecstatic release by (and through) mechanomorphic constrictions and emancipations. Horn's work with human-machine connectivity achingly refigures the human body into an almost automated energetic substance that can charm like Chaplin in the film Modern Times (1936). As with Chaplin, often in her work Horn makes humans seem robotic and machines humanoid.

As one penetrates the folds of the Metz exhibition layout, the sense is that Horn is opening up the curtains of her imaginary dominion. A dominion that can be as sensual as a soft feathery caress, or as curious

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as a chimera, or as mechanically glamorous as a Black Forest cuckoo clock.



Rebecca Horn, "Pencil Mask" (1973), 16mm film still, Ton Fabre, (Rebecca Horn Collection, @ Rebecca Horn/ProLitteris, Zürich; courtesy Tinguely Museum)

In her early private performance works, often Horn obfuscates and handicaps the body in order to raid restrictive social sex codes and to explore space itself. A delight with tension and relief is evident in the acutely visceral Pencil Mask (1973) film, for example. This mask looks like a spikey instrument of S&M erotic torture, but actually transforms the artist's face into an instrument for making drawings that wildly escape the suffocating plushness of her body-restriction gear. As also seen in "Arm-Extensions" (1968), such images of radically elegant body bindings and extenders are frequent with Horn in her early years. These bound-body-centric projects, like "Cornucopia: Séance for Two Breasts" (1970) and "Exercises in Nine Parts: Scratching Both Walls at Once" (1974–1975), were a reaction to the artist's confinement to bed when hospitalized as an art student due to severe lung problems. These art pieces seem to me like a young, female body coming to understand itself on the basis of absurdity. Such embedded farcicality places her art within the tradition of art-techno games and giggly gender combos typical of Marcel Duchamp and Oskar Schlemmer.

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Rebecca Horn "Cornucopia: Séance for Two Breasts" (1970) (photograph by the author)

Likewise is the love/hate heat in the peek-a-boo driven "Feather Instrument" (1970) costume, filmed in use in the mesmerizing *Performances 1* (1970–1972) film. Here, an idyllic, young naked man's hairy body is peeked at by two young women as they lift and drop the white feathered blinds of his box garment by pulling the strings. Following Horn's 1970s performances with body extensions, masks, and feather objects came her first kinetic sculptures that were

featured in her films.

The cinematic spine of Horn's work in Metz appears to me romantic, methodical, and decisive — her elements reappear over time within different contexts as recurring characters, à la Balzac. This repetition gives her body of work a satisfying stylistic consistency and profundity seen rather rarely today. But even with that consistent silver vein of references running through her work, I was startled by the sheer abundance of artistic and intellectual viscera on display here. Not only are numerous art historical connections sparked within the brain, but respectful precedents are unambiguously established by the Metz curators' placement of Horn's artistic influences and spiritual peers alongside her work throughout the show. Thus diving into her life's work feels like a feat of cartography as much as an opportunity for art critique.



Rebecca Horn "Cornucopia: Séance for Two Breasts" (1970) (photograph by the author)

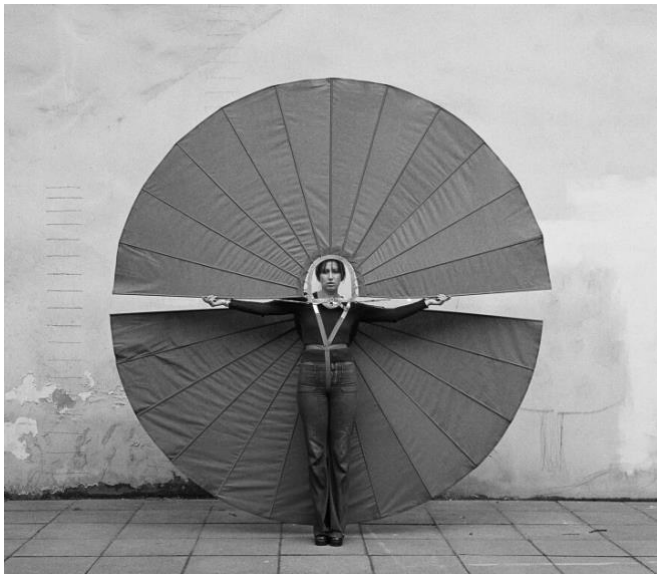
This revealing and celebrating of artistic influence was generously approved by Horn. And it was good decision, because they sagaciously supplied *Theatre of Metamorphoses* with a progressiveness that twines around you as it presents in parallel those who have fed Horn's intricate imagination. These include: Raymond Roussel, Antoine Artaud, Claude Cahun, Samuel Beckett, Alberto Giacometti, Man Ray, Meret Oppenheim, Hans Bellmer, Jean Cocteau, Buster Keaton, Joseph Beuys, Max Ernst, Luis Buñuel,

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Duchamp, and the French ballerina Liane Daydé, who danced as a unicorn in the *Lady and the Unicorn* ballet of 1959.

As a result, throughout *Theatre of Metamorphoses*, there is more artistic density and adventure than at any other one-person show I have seen so far this year. As example, just by considering Artaud's run-amok drawing "The Machine of Being" (1946), placed near Horn's hung, inverted, slow moving, guts-revealing piano "Concert for Anarchy" (1990), the desire to experience all art objects as weird fluidity and fluctuating ambiguity is enhanced.

In general, Horn's work sits staunchly between the lurching horns of Georges Bataille's brand of mystical Surrealism since it is magical, excessive, and overwhelms binary divisions. Her encyclopedic artistic references (or parallels) are always transgressively erudite, and when not supplied by the curators (the case in Basel) come to mind on their own: Loie Fuller, Yvonne Rainer, Alfons Schilling's body/vision extenders, Vito Acconci, and, of course, the early body-centric work of Bruce Nauman. But especially like Fuller, Horn's image techniques are magnificently burlesque and technical in a (perhaps) female way. Even though Horn would certainly reject the binary category of male/female, her work often opens up folded flaps to bare something, as we see in the iconic Achim Thode photograph of Horn's "Mechanical Body Fan" (1974–75).



Achim Thode, "Rebecca Horn's Mechanical Body Fan" (1974–75) photograph, 80 x 60 cm, (@ Rebecca Horn Workshop, Adagp, Paris, 2019; courtesy Centre Pompidou-Metz)

In the Basel *Body Fantasies* show, Horn's radical body-centric work provokes imaginative thought in another way by presenting as similar the cadenced nature of both sexual action and mechanical repetition, thereby suggesting a sense of transcendental

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Rebecca Horn, "Butterfly Body Fantasy" (2009) Rebecca Horn Collection, Rebecca Horn/ProLitteris, Zürich © 2019 Tinguely Museum Basel (photo by Daniel Spehr, courtesy Tinguely)

timelessness. With the beautiful "Butterfly Body Fantasy" (2009), Horn's gorgeous, non-stop, mechanically fluttering butterfly box, her work takes on a Joseph Cornell-like mythical inference, but even more crammed with exquisite subtleties. Its motorized, iridescent, blue morpho flapping wings lured me into an infinite private tumult of contradictory impulses that never stop fluttering.

Seeing *Body Fantasies* and *Theatre of Metamorphoses* makes it clear that the mental energies behind Horn's work is informed by fragile insights into the limitations of

the quivering (female) sexual body and Horn's strong desire for circulating energies to open and feel and spread that body further and further. As seen with her "Measuring Box" (1970) sculpture, Horn has first calculated and then riddled the world of female flesh with obscurity and incoherence that in combination exceeds jejune sexual and political positions. Take for example, Horn's slender painting-machine and painting "Salome Body Fantasies" (1988) that suggests a messy overcoming of the male fear of infinite female eroticism through studied and balanced consolation. (Salome represents the reckless female sexual temptation and the male fear of castration.)

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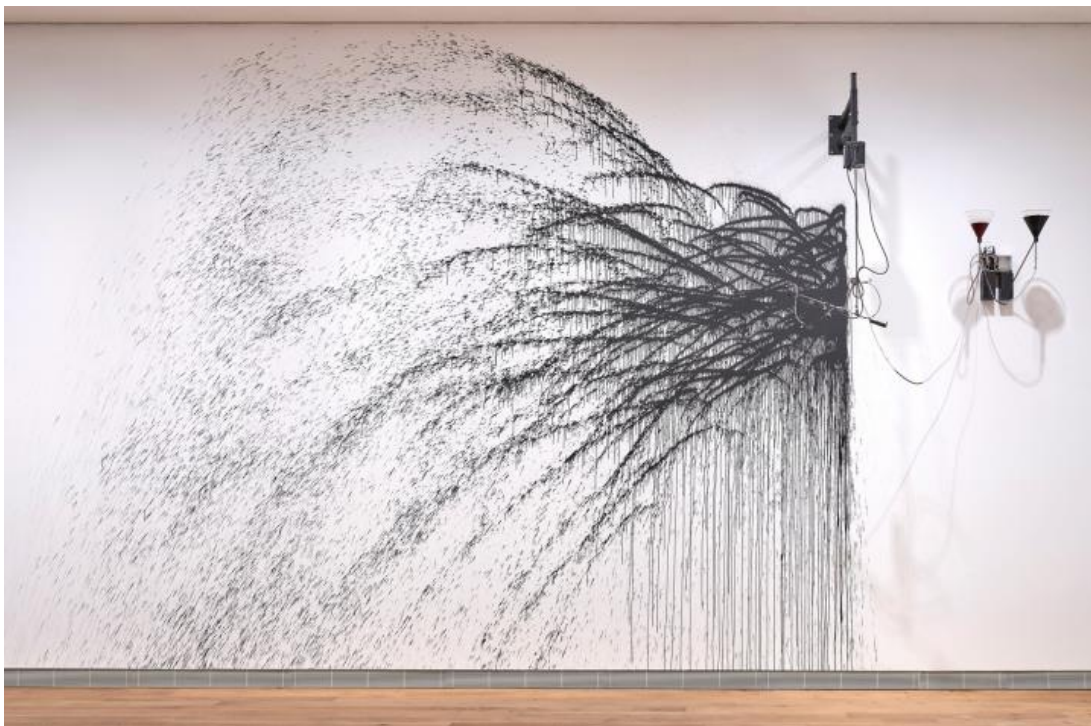
*"Measuring Box" (1970) photograph, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart (@ Rebecca Horn/ProLitteris, Zürich; courtesy Tinguely Museum)*

Horn's work with such elaborate metamorphic constructions in *Body Fantasies* only flounders when it goes demimondaine by becoming too big and too much like a movie set. Such is the case with the coldly sprawling "El Rio de la L una" (The Moon River, 1992): a metallic conduit system comprised of seven mercury-pumping boxes, or "heart chambers." With such sprawling sculptural installation pieces Horn may not have anything to be ashamed of, but she plays no part in the resistance to mass spectacle. Her woozy sex-machine art works best as intimate agents of self-transcendence. Sometimes vast scale works well for a pensive artist keen on psychosexual semiotics, but this wasn't one of those times.

However, the enormous grunge painting-machine and painting "The Lovers" (1991) was brilliant at a huge scale, and successfully dominated some prime Basel wall space with a semi-dream world of eccentric, self-created myth. That wall space, by the way, was gloriously label free (an informative handbook was provided instead). Much theoretical, ripe fruit can be plucked from this fucking, pa nsexual, genderless, hands-off painting machine as it squeezes the juice out of the love of painting by eliminating the hand — a semi-radical move into the cool automaton zone largely inspired by the writings of Heinrich von Kleist.

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As a painting-machine and painting, “The Lovers” verges on the exuberantly preposterous. As such, it is perfect for schadenfreude lovers ravished by weariness and woe. Turning the corner and discovering the lovers *in flagrante delicto*, and approaching this enormous spray-drip piece for a better look creates a jolt of self-conscious connection/disconnection that lifts both sex and painting out of their superfluous state of sluggish, solipsistic melancholia. It is a mechanical sex work that mixes black, oily-looking ink with pink champagne, and thus touches on the many facets of the human-as-machine condition: love, power, conflict, sexuality, surprise, luxury, loss of control, autonomy, intoxication, ejaculation, and internal strife. “The Lovers” is a juicy receptacle for an artificial intelligence fever dream, disrupting and shaking up what is boringly cliché about the love of hand-made painting.



“The Lovers” (1991), Rebecca Horn Collection, Rebecca Horn/ProLitteris, Zürich @ 2019  
Tinguely Museum Basel (photo by Daniel Spehr courtesy Tinguely Museum)

In both shows, many of Horn’s works also point in the direction of the flighty intensity of birds and other animals. As with the masterful, kinetic feather mobile “Owl Zen” (2010) in *Body Fantasies*, the animal feeling is constituted by what is absent as well as with what is present. Its slow, pinkish, opening and closing erotically unsettles and makes more lively the intricate



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strangeness of the human animal. This mood is also felt in the Achim Thode's photograph "Unicorn" (1970) in *Theatre of Metamorphoses*, taken as part of Horn's famous private performance film *Unicorn* (1970) that was inspired by the Czechoslovakia border crossing scene in Jean Genet's 1949 book *The Thief's Journal*. Horn's enchanting Super 8, 12-minute, color film is a definite highlight of the Metz show. It opens with the elegant mystery of Kenneth Anger's short avant-garde film *Artificial Water*, (1953) that presents petite Carmilla Salvatorelli, made fairy-like, walking stately in the Garden of the Villa D'Este in Tivoli, Italy. After noticing the similar feel in the start of these two films, I later learned that Horn had indeed studied with Anger in Hamburg.



"Salome Body Fantasies" (1988)  
Rebecca Horn Collection, Rebecca  
Horn/ProLitteris, Zürich © 2019 Tinguely  
Museum Basel (photo by Daniel Spehr,  
courtesy Tinguely Museum)

My viewing of Horn's two shows one right after the other fruitfully pointed my cultural attention down a path of social alchemy guided by poetic robotics and automated pleasure. Such intransigent obliqueness is just what both we humans and android life forms have been waiting for.

Rebecca Horn: Theatre of Metamorphoses at the Centre Pompidou-Metz (1 Parvis des Droits de l'Homme, Metz, France), curated by Emma Lavigne and Alexandra Müller, remains open until January 13; and Rebecca Horn: Body Fantasies at the Tinguely Museum (Paul Sacher-Anlage 2, Basel, Switzerland), curated by Sandra Beate Reimann, remains open until September 22.

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*Achim Thode, "Unicorn by Rebecca Horn" (1970) black and white silver print, 80 x 60 cm, (Rebecca Horn Workshop Adagp, Paris, 2019; courtesy Centre Pompidou-Metz)*