After Freud: Members Only

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The irony, fateful no less, that the exposed penis has been largely absent from our culture while the phallus is ubiquitous in its symbolic form and dominant as power structure, has occupied analysts, from Sigmund Freud to Jacques Lacan and beyond, whose work extended from psychoanalytical practice to the investigation of cultural neuroses.

Freud's exploration of the psychological effects that derive from infants observing physiological differences between the female and male gender, was based on the visibility and related exposure of the penis and the perception of a 'loss' when the penis could not be seen. According to Freud an absence of the penis prompts castration anxiety in the male infant while the female child perceives the penis as an object that is missing and which she therefore desires. This is not a genital or sexual desire but defined as 'penis envy' – the wish to possess an object that others have.[1] For this infantile recognition the exposure of the penis is significant. When it is not there or hidden the envy and anxiety, respectively, become sublimated further and enter the realm of the purely symbolic – with the potential to generate neuroses at a later stage. Since most societies conceal the primary genital area this symbolic power and function of the penis is heightened to an extent that the male member can be represented in reduced shape and diminutive size – think for example of the pre-pubescent look of male genitalia in occidental sculpture and painting – without forfeiting any of its acquired socio-cultural power and dominance.

[1] For a succinct description see Sigmund Freud, 'Einige psychische Folgen des anatomischen Geschlechtsunterschieds', *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, vol. 11, no.4 (1925), pp. 401-410; engl. trans. 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, vol.8 (1927), pp.133-142. After the initial (mis)understanding of women's psychology as analogous to men, this essay is Freud's principal re-assessment of gender differences that lead to his more substantial, independent analyses of female sexuality in later texts.

Such a reading of the exposed or concealed penis presupposes the continuing validity of Freudian interpretations; something that many feminist scholars and writers have questioned. Yet even when qualifying these tenets through the cultural and social environment in which Freud's analytical practice was embedded and which renders relative much of his interpretations, the aspect of the penis's exposure remains significant. The validity of the castration anxiety and penis envy resides in its mirroring of contemporary mores in central Europe at the outset of the previous century and this, in turn, renders them relevant for cultural critique or, more specifically, artistic debate when one observes these customs as having continued to inform the concrete economy of gender relations as well as the more abstract economy of the (cultural) sign. One might well contest the self-referential character of Freudian precepts, in that a phallocratic culture has historically generated its own analytical templates, but these very templates possess great potential to become cultural myths that can provide fertile grounds for artists to articulate – especially when they are questioned and opposed.

For an artist like Renate Bertlmann, born and working in Freud's adopted home town, the prevalence of such cultural myths borne from the psychological sublimation of physical distinctions between the sexes poses the question of how to avoid the trap of Freudian orthodoxy while still articulating the evidential phallocracy in Western culture. When Bertlmann wrote in 1982 about the continuous threats 'die uns Frauen be-herr-scht' (that master us women)[2] she articulated a concrete socio-political reality, as much as a cultural cliché, that many feminist artists are facing. An evident procedural step for her was to expose the penis in order to counter the symbolism of the phallus; to show (male) members in order to demonstrate the misogynist exclusivity of their member-ship.

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[2] Renate Bertlmann cited by Krista Federspiel, 'Die Aggression der 'Verhüterlis'' [1982], in Bertlmann, *Amo Ergo Sum*, vol.1, Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1989, p.85.

The progression from articulating genitalia as modernist abstraction ('Exhibitionism'-series, 1973), via condom-objects ('Ammunition Belt', 1976), to the 'Phallic Objects' of 1980 display the penis successively as a plastic object whose symbolism and cultural mediation merely dresses up a distinct type and form that remains unchallenged and formulaic. Although given to erection, the ultimate incarnation of this form – as ritualised golden object in 'Iunvencus Cupidus'[3] of 1985 – is curiously droopy and appears now, despite its 30 cm circumference, symbolic rather than aggressive. Here the enlarged visualisation is remote from penis envy: either the male is pitied for having to push laboriously his member around or he is sidestepped to escape any confrontation with his ludicrously glorified bell-end.

Yet Bertlmann's exposition still resides in the simultaneous reading of the penis as organ and as signifier, echoing the structuralist approach that Lacan had employed in his post-Freudian discourses.[4] In his analysis Lacan had derived the question from the Freudian precepts of penis envy and castration anxiety as to why we assume the attributes of our sex only through a threat – 'the threat indeed of their privation?'[5] Threats can constitute dramatic narratives that lend themselves to be articulated in art, but threats are also, structurally speaking, nodal points at which conditions are changed and new actions are prompted. The terror therein can hold an oddly cathartic value; they can herald turns and reversals. Threats can be permanently implied by dominant socio-economic power structures or cultural hegemonies but they can arise equally from sudden subjective confrontation. Within the confrontation of the subject by a threatening object or its representation, material danger and symbolic order are to be distinguished. The former

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[3] Latin for horny young man.

[4] I am refraining here from entering into an argument whether Lacanian discourses actually constitute analytical practice that is comparable to Freud or whether they are, in fact, deconstructive readings that function mainly on the level of textual exegesis. Although I am partial to the latter and thus sympathetic to the related questioning of Lacan's scientific/medical relevance, the cultural impact of his theories has proved enduring.

[5] Jacques Lacan, 'La Signification du phallus' [Die Bedeutung des Phallus], lecture delivered at the Max Planck Institute, Munich in May 1958, in: *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966, pp.685-695, here p.685; engl. trans. New York/London: Norton, 2006, pp.575-84, here p.576.

establishes a physical, spatial relationship between subject and object, the latter formulates it as a distinction between signified and signifier. Let's take as an example Renate Bertlmann's (melo)dramatic series of 1979/80, entitled 'Wurfmesser' (Throwing Knifes). Here we see condom-like shapes – as the aforementioned plastic mediations of the phallus – adorned with blades and spikes. As separate objects with functional components like handle and crossguard they appear very much as weapons primed to assault and to injure. Associated through their material with ribbed, spiked or dotted condoms they replace stimulating the female sex with brutalising her. But, at the same time, these objects are dis-membered, removed from the male body and isolated – prime examples of the underlying castration anxiety in phallocratic culture: in replacing the penis by a habitual object of aggression it also disappears as a physiological signified and denotes the symbolic loss of power within a ritual of aggressive domination.

We know from Freud, who had adopted the term from anthropological study as much as from Marx, that such subject-object relations give rise to a displacement of (sexual, genital) desire through *fetishism*. In Bertlmann the fetishism of the phallic knifes is an equally complex constituent in exposing the penis. Her 'Vertreterkoffer' (Sample Case) shows variations on a theme, specimen that invite rituals of consumption. The travelling salesman – here representative of the symbolic order of the phallus – offers his wares to the consumer and asks for discrete choice and subjective preferences, yet this ritual of consumption produces a physical threat to the genital area and perhaps to sexuality itself. The Lacanian reading of Freud's envy- and anxiety-concepts as assuming the attributes of sex through privation is materialised here by objectifying the phallus as weapon. Once again the penis is no longer envied as it ceases to be a physiological member and becomes symbolic of phallocratic membership that is out to dominate our societies and cultures.

When symbolic objects are represented as samples of a commercial product they are arranged under the rule of the commodity and thus turn into fetishes, into objects whose interrelations are analogous to the social relations between subjects in capitalism. Bertlmann's work thus moves the reading of the spiky phallus from a concrete threat further toward a more abstract reading of the male member imposing itself on an economic structure that was created for and by himself. But this process is not one of simple abstraction; it is a shift of the signifier back and forth between levels of denotation to connotation. Bertlmann creates an apparent symbolic object from widely available commodities (condoms, knives) and then moves from the psycho-sexual symbolism to a more abstract critique of patterns of consumption, in which the female subject is historically objectified. The dominance is not simply gendered or sexualised – worse, it is exposed as being structural.

Cultural myths perpetuated by analyses of sexual pathologies have provided ample references for artists. The Surrealists for one – including Lacan who associated himself with them in the interwar years – had taken Freud's genital hierarchy of castration anxiety and penis envy and transposed it into (artistic) discourses which focused on the female sex in all its forms while ignoring and concealing the male: men in suits undressed female mannequins, naked nymphs-as-streetwalkers were dreamed up by stiffly attired male bourgeois. In two photo-sequences of 1977 Bertlmann reverses this tradition and renders the absence of the penis part of a historicised narrative. 'Renée ou René 2' shows the artist suited and booted, first kissing, then stripping bare a female mannequin, ending up with her head between the legs of the doll. The b/w artificially aged images, the old-fashioned mannequin and the artist's clothing place the sequence in obvious relation to Surrealist photographs from the 1930s by Man Ray, Wols or Brassaï, while ostensibly effacing the habitual gender distinction between the signifier and the signified of Eros and sex. Instead of a the male artist, who in his subjective, creative expression pretends to desire the showroom dummy, that is the deaf-mute, demure and immobile representation of the female sex, Bertlmann pairs the female

signified – the made-up doll – with a *female* signifier – the artist playing her gendered role. Bertlmann is not dressed up as a man, the high heels of her shoes and the hair visible under the beret indicate as much, but she performs the role of the male who, in the tradition of the Surrealists, subjectifies through his art the absolute objectification of the female. His photos, assemblages or installations of the mannequin were intended as ironic comments on a commodity culture, which displayed its sexual pathologies through objects that once had been offered up for consumption but were by now mere phantoms of the past that could be built into artistic critique. But what if the signifier of Eros and sex, the supremely subjective artist turns out to be female? The absence of the sex in the doll (even her breasts are merely indicated as soft forms) is the absence of the penis in the artist, yet the castration anxiety before the unformed genital area does not affect the one who has no penis herself and who, moreover, must reject the symbolic power of the phallus.

Freud wrote in 1925 that little boys confronted with female genitalia at first remain unsure as to the meaning of the penis being absent. 'It is not until later, when some threat of castration has obtained a hold upon him, that the observation becomes important to him: if he then recollects or repeats it, it arouses a terrible storm of emotion in him and forces him to believe in the reality of the threat which he has hitherto laughed at.'[6] The threat of privation, which requires sublimation and/or displacement, is combined in later life with the observation of a loss of object in the female – whether she herself chooses to care about this loss/penis envy does not concern him – and embedded in a phallocratic power structure with terrible results. Thus Freud continued: 'This combination of circumstances leads to two reactions, which may become fixed and will in that case, whether separately or together or in conjunction with other factors, permanently determine the boy's relations to women: horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her.'[7]

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[6] Freud, 'Einige psychische Folgen...', op. cit., p.404; engl. trans. ,'Some Psychological Consequences…', op. cit., p.136.
[7] ibid. pp.404/05; engl. trans. ibid., pp.136/37.

Bertlmann's first series 'Renée ou René 1' confronted this apparent mutilation – which is nothing but reverse displacement of the threat of course – head on. The suited and booted artist masturbates an invisible member, running through a choreography of ecstatic contortions that for the absence of the object appear absurd. Fully clothed, her hands mime the touching of a penis that is not there, yet this loss is not a sad compensation, as the Surrealists had defined masturbation.[8] The non-visible penis is non-existent; despite the male attire Renée is female and her aping of the man pleasuring himself is not borne from envy but satirical in nature. Our phallocratic culture pretends that the penis does not need to be exposed in order to function and to dominate, it can be a wholly symbolic phallus. Bertlmann shows that this is not the case. If the penis is not there the phallus becomes an absurdity. Dialectically, the photo sequence shows the woman's pretence of the penis as the very rejection of the phallus.

Feminism has addressed simultaneously the orthodox tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis and the clichéd representation of gendered objects in modern art. A generation of women artists took the phallus and displayed it as penis – stocktaking of the symbolic and displaying it in all its blue-veined, basic physiology. A generation of artists from Lousie Bourgeois[9] and Betty Tompkins[10] to Bertlmann, Lynda Benglis[11] and Shelley Lowell[12] rendered prominent the male member to reverse its phallic power and expose its crude potential to dominate.[13] Rather than binary oppositions between male and female or between dominance and submission, these exposures pioneered an ultimate reversal. Bertlmann's and other feminist works of the period constitute material studies of procedural change which prefigured and

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[8] See 'Recherches sur la sexualité', *La Révolution surréaliste*, no.11 (15 March 1928), p.33
[9] 'Fillette', a latex/plaster sculpture of 1968.
[10] The series of 'Fuck' paintings from 1969 to 1974.
[11] The doubled dildo in her *Artforum*-advert of 1974
[12] 'Homage to Oldenburg – Soft Penis', 1973 or the strung up penis in 'Guilty', 1974.
[13] For an appropriately 'queer' critique, see Richard Meyer, 'Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s', in: Cornelia Butler/Lisa Gabrielle Mark (eds.), *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Los Angeles/Cambridge, MA: MoCA/MIT, 2007, pp.362-83.

anticipated the desired and required political, social and cultural change. For this change to occur the phallic order had to be exposed as absurd; not as artificially surreal but as antiquated and nonsensical. Concrete feminist art – as political not as formal *art concrète* – affected in a self-reflexive fashion the reversal that was to herald new and enlightened gender politics. Bertlmann brought the phallus back to the penis and conceptually aimed to restrict the member to a physiological difference of the sexes rather than an instrument of exclusion. By declaring the penis an everyday, ubiquitous object, the phallus looses its power and can easily be subjected to a variety of artistic and formal contemplations – without foregoing its banal but troubling effect on the member-ship of our present symbolic order.