

Speech for Renate Bertlmann at the presentation of her DVD *Amo ergo sum Works 1972-2010*
Secession, Vienna

As the DVD presentation illustrates (even more so than the catalogue trilogy published in 1989 by Ritter or the catalogue from the Fotogalerie Wien in 2002), Renate Bertlmann has since the beginning of her artistic career been a multifaceted player on various levels (in terms of content), she has used diverse technical media since 1970 and has made use of her own body in public performances as well as in stagings in her atelier. The transformation of sculptural approaches applied to installations and objects, combined with theatrical sequences, at times including music and sound through tape recordings creating sound-space sculptures, were since their introduction by John Cage, Japanese Gutai, but also Yoko Ono, brand new in Europe during the 1970s. This was received as a total surprise, often even considered offensive and scandalous, at a time when Actionism and the Happening after 1958 – with George Mathieu, the “Wiener Gruppe” (or Vienna Group), the Prachenskys as well as Nitschs with the primal scene of theater interwoven with gestural splash and drip paintings (*Bildschüttungen*) self-paintings (*Selbstbemalung*) (Brus) – was only able to establish itself with painstaking difficulty. Yet it proved to be an even rockier road for the feminists of Viennese Actionism that, with Renate Bertlmann, also brought the characteristics of Allan Kaprow’s or Wolf Vostell’s Happenings to Vienna. Audience participation, a relevant aspect of the animistic aesthetic in art since 1945 (see for example the current exhibition *Animismus. Moderne hinter den Spiegeln* at the Generali Foundation, Vienna), then became especially relevant for the artist practice of artists such as Renate Bertlmann, VALIE EXPORT, Linda Christanell, Helga Philipp, Peter Weibel, etc..

The path to acknowledgement in collective consciousness was a dogged one – with a delay in regional museums to this day – and such acceptance was only made possible due to artistic research. Despite the exhibition “Mothers of Invention” and Carola Dertnig’s publications, and in spite of the increased relevance of Bertlmann-like works for young artists from Anna Jermolaewa and Andrea Kalteis to Die Geschwister Odradek, it is still widely unknown that the “*Streicheleinheiten*” (or “caresses”) or pacifier wreaths and phallic objects (among others made out of latex or foam, Plexiglass, tulle, and glitter) that are worn or carried by the human body preceded Franz West’s “*Passstücke*” (“adaptives” or “fitting pieces”). Bertlmann is more frequently associated with her role as a serious pioneer in the fields of staged photography and the expanded field of photography (being a founding member of the photography initiative FOTO FLUSS is one such example). She is also known to a certain extent for her objects and expanded notion of art in general. Her use of her body in the performance scene should however become just as recognized as “Action Pants: Genital Panic” by EXPORT. By now, the break away from *logos*-masculine / *mythos*-feminine for which EXPORT, Katharina Sieverding, Marina Abramovic, Gina Pane, Birgit Jürgenssen or Bertlmann fought for, has long since been achieved. The younger generation has been able to reap some of the benefits. Yet a lamentation about the almost non-existent hype surrounding actionist women is here entirely inappropriate, since art history is constantly being rewritten and the DVD could once again change something in the ever-delayed expansion of a narrow-minded, undemocratic and still very elitist art historiography here in this country. It is here that I would like to remind the reader of a quote by Christian Krawagna in an artist catalogue published in Krems in 2003: In Austria only one woman per decade is allowed be the great new discovery...

Yet there are other aspects in Bertlmann’s work that are still cause for discomfort, also with regards to her critical posture towards the art market. Being on the pulse of the times over a

longer period of time, and in some cases being ahead of the times is in fact not a good criterion for securing a place in mainstream. Accomplishments are only rewarded after the fact. Additionally, there are two things that, constantly running parallel to the supposed avant-garde history of sexuality, further hinder the commonplace triumph: Bertlmann explores mechanisms of pornography that are anchored in society. She never spares us from the embarrassments or breaches of taboo and has a great interest, even theoretical in nature, in kitsch. In 1981, she organized a symposium about Art and Sexuality; in 1993 on Kitsch, Art and Taboo. These research activities did not go unnoticed by the city of Vienna. What was back then a rather unusual attempt to combine art and scholarship has now been recognized in its own right as “Artist Research”. By contrast to forced provocation with the goal of maintaining, through scandalization, a kind romantic idea of the martyr cult of the artist in bourgeois society, Bertlmann always pursues ambivalencies and the inconsistencies with a great deal of humor, something that lacked entirely during the early phases of Viennese Actionism among her well-known masculine peers after Egon Schiele and Richard Gerstl.

The feminist cry for self-determination (of body and mind), the caricature of the bride and the false sentimentality of the dreams of motherhood or being a bride (once again so terribly present in gruesome perfectionist rites of consumption in collapsing late-capitalism) are easily understood through a large vocabulary of gestures and mimics. It should however not be forgotten that back then the discourse revolved around the search for an alternative “feminine aesthetic”. But Bertlmann has however already surveyed the ambivalent forces of *Eros* in the reversal of roles – as did Jürgen Klauke or Urs Lüthi around the same time, yet from a different starting point and often ending in the masquerade of a woman. Bertlmann’s photo series “Renée ou René” is only the most well-known “skinning” or masquerading in the direction of “trans- or cross-gender” (currently used, albeit clumsy terms) that, contemporaneous to the writings of Judith Butler, denied strict boundaries between genders and instead, called for the differentiation of social gender and sex.

The central ideas in this work consistently employ varying approaches, experimentally orbiting as if from one station to the next. Various media - photo series, installations and performances (public, as well as those staged in the artist studio resulting in photo series, but also as music score-like sequences of Polaroids or contact sheets – melt into each other. The results of this orbiting around ideas are collected on so-called educational boards (“Lehrtafel”), something like anti-statements in response the masculinely structured score of a Nitsch or Beuys. Behind each and every one of the passionately processed “paradigms of longing” stands failure, denial, visible in the scenes of veiling such as the “Les Amants” series. But also the topic of death, whose dominance Bertlmann then opposes with the life-affirming symbol of the ancient Egyptian ankh along with *Eros*, like fingers crossed behind one’s back (*Hexenkreuz*). The veiling becomes a misty haze to the otherworld, a rejection of consumption and a revealing of the strange nature of money or of misguided church dogma. Very few have skewered – quite literally in the case of many object series – the prudery of the church and the old cults of Priapus or Phallus with as much pleasure as Renate Bertlmann has. (gelitin also use toys for their expressions regarding the phallic cult, however the combination of the dressed-up pecker as a dervish, a naughty child, the pope or a mummy only constitutes a minor part in their series of fantastical figures.) The longing for tenderness and protection from violence caustically approach satire and yet other issues – such as child abandonment, shame, powerlessness, failure – endure in a time of absurdity as critical statements, even in their playful approach.

The “primal vagina” meets “Saint Erectus” and breast ex-votos. At one end of these works stands the symbolism of the early history of art with its figures of women, wrongly named

“Venus”, to which the fetishist character of the earlier works refer. Bertlmann then takes this to the other end of time, into the present – also in regards to the merchandising of the breast as fetish – touch-objects (“*Tastobjekte*”) are as essential to her as the knife or blade¹ (to lastly point to a heavy repression of *Eros* in our society. Violence that increasingly replaces real erotic or abuse is often present in her performances – the woman as a sex doll with no desire (at times however there is also a masculine sex doll, the woman as phallus), a mouth stuffed with Lego blocks, riddled with feathers is elevated in its loud colors from kitsch to threatening power. The plastic prostheses, from pacifier to dildo and sex doll, replace the human other. The substitute is dressed up and cherished as a human-like, fruit-like replacement, sprinkled with glitter and metamorphosed into insects like evil dwarves and aliens, displayed on their own alters, in vitrines and snow globes and captured in photobooks and films. According to Vilem Flusser, behind the post-modern types of play – kitsch and camp (Susan Sontag) – in the ever-growing culturally stored memory are the signs of its decay or its transformation into immaterial images on the computer of a future information society even after the post-industrial one. Just like garbage and cheap materials, kitsch and camp range from being a passing fad to being totally constipating and consequently require the disposal of cultural memory as a sign of our simultaneous exploitation of nature. Even politically, we are falling more and more obviously back into medieval or even older myths and ideologies and we compensate these retrospectively with kitsch – Bertlmann wants to make us aware that the destructive components of being glued to the couch in front of the television can only be countered by switching the channels or by turning off the tube. Trivial myths of desire, infant fantasies and erotic prostheses are replaceable – at first in life with multi-faceted art and then through reality.

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(Translation: Melissa Lumbroso)

¹ The pun in the original German text goes lost in translation, yet should not go unmentioned. The word used in place of blade or edge is “Sch(n)eide”: implying both the connotation of a cutting edge, while the word without the “n”, “Scheide”, translates to mean both “sheath” and “vagina” in English.