

## Attempt of a gentle Rebel

The interrelation of Eros and Thanatos stands at the centre of Renate Bertlmann's aesthetic investigations. Faithful to the motto "Amo Ergo Sum" under which the Viennese artist subsumes her work since the early 1970's, her sumptuous settings, settled in the sensitive frontier zone between kitsch, art and taboo, visualise this timeless topic in an equally imaginative as subtle way. Corresponding to the complexity of the reproach, this extensive artwork is intended as a trilogy whose equal parts are titled Pornography, Irony and Utopia. "Pornography concerns itself in the closer and broader sense with the war of the genders, the offenders and victims and the many other facets of naked survival. Irony is on the tracks of desires and an aggression rooted in infancy and tries to handle the arising sensations of pleasure and revulsion. Utopia does not dedicate itself, as one might be lead to believe, to visions of the future. On the contrary, it paves the way into the uncertain with sudorific exercises like asceticism, denial and exercises in death" (Renate Bertlmann, 1989). Resulting originally from the need to order the innumerable works of an overflowing creativity, the trilogy rapidly emerged as a demanding program which has, to this day, lost nothing in topicality and necessity. As powerful and meaningful the individual elements may appear for themselves, they are permeated and dependent on each other. In all facets of Bertlmann's productions Pornography appears ironic and utopian, Irony utopian and pornographic and Utopia pornographic and ironic. "Amo Ergo Sum" aims at self-assertion and self-confidence directed at communication in a patriarchal society from an explicitly feminine perspective... It means the equivalence of body, soul and spirit in a piercing, indivisible totality (Maria Vogel, in 1989).

When Renate Bertlmann tracks the trivial myths of desire in her plastic and picturesque settings, which are analysed in film and photography in a second work sequence, she takes moral and social traditions into her visor. The total concept does not only refer structurally to the trinity, this Christian dominion symbol of a male triumvirate, but also in content.

Great importance is given to aspects of gender differences and the function of role clichés. With joyful gesture the artist dismantles the insignia of male power and glory. However, she also describes the power of longing and lends form to the image of successful inter-sexual communication. Not least, she imagines sensations of shame in pictures which directly touch all the senses and explores the sensual fascination which lies in the interrelation of distance and approximation. The artistic interest applies primarily to metamorphosis. Performances and photo sequences with diverse scenarios of metamorphosis are joyfully experimented with. Installations and picture cycles sketch poetic stories and accompany their participants on their journey through an eventful existence. The differentiated iconography of these compositions is uninhibited in helping itself from the historic fund. The archaic fertility symbols of phallus and vulva appear as well as popular motives of piety.

Popular fairytale characters like Snow White and the seven dwarfs or the unicorn appear in an altered narrative context. Impressed by the feminine discourse concerning feminine role models and the individual need for space from attacks of reality, symbols of utopian, egalitarian love dominate in her early work. In the sequence, "Zaertliche Beruehrung" (Gentle Touch), two contrasting- coloured latex pacifiers explore the different stages of intimacy. The two equal cast members rub against each other unabashedly, wrap around and penetrate each other in an unmistakable representation of a sexual encounter. "Ex Voto", a sculpture of the late 1980's, is substantially more aggressive: feminine breasts, promising nourishment and care put forth an unexpected destructive quality. A sharp knife points out from a nipple of the heart shaped Styrofoam torso, presented like a valuable in a glass aquarium. The object of desire, the female body no longer signals vulnerability, but threatens injury, suddenly demands a respectful distance. The compositions of the past decade are dominated by a rather ironic gaze, preferably falling on the erect phallus appearing in the most unlikely costumes. A devotional is dedicated to "San Erectus" with glamour and glitter. Lavish, tailor cut ladies' robes decorate a group of colourful dildos, "Les Enfants Terrible," who have come together for an absurd fashion show. Seeking shelter underneath a glass bell with "Cheese from Austria" embossed on it, the seven dwarfs are dressed splendidly in their long pointed red caps. The cardinals bedded in silk and satin (from the computer animated sequence, "Zwitscher Litanei" – Chirping Litany) prove that spiritual vestments suit the upright fellow very well. Depictions of the male organ no longer shock. They are caricatures, "that pick at the obligatory male society and their relevant representatives and... brings the military, the eminence grise, religious prophets and the entire breed of heirs under a common phallic denominator." (Peter Gorsen, 1989).

On the other hand, these luxuriously outfitted and lovingly decorated figurines are cute products of diligence to be interpreted as an ironic comment on female desire. This erotic prosthetic has long been socially acceptable as pleasure-bringing vehicles. For Renate Bertlmann they are an ambiguous subject, which degenerate to toys under the glass lintel. "All that remains of Eros' elemental force are infantile fantasies which should be protected rather than destroyed" (Konrad Paul Liessman).

Digitally generated picture stories with sound belong to the most exciting works of the last two years. The animations titled "Short Cuts" by the artist link up formally and in content to the early experiments with sensitive materials and thematize the possibilities and limitations of sensual perception. "Formationen" (Formations) lets the gaze wander over a permanently changing landscape of smooth, vividly active latex forms. In "Looking Glass," sumptuous splendour and abstract figures enchant into a kaleidoscopic world of forms and colours. As different as the screen sequences are, they nevertheless appeal equally to our ability to perceive. In a short time, they open abyssal Microcosmos which dream of the omnipresence of sensual sensations.

The facet-rich work of the artist, who appreciates classical display methods as much as experiments with non-artistic media and materials, is formally permeated by her explicitly photographic view of reality. All her works, whether they are of ephemeral nature as performances and installations, or even conventional artworks; behave as raw material to additional photographic settings. In countless individual pictures, Renate Bertlmann captures the sensory certainty of her existence onto celluloid and squeezes the last detail out of the photographs. This is how in over three decades, a truly monumental archive from which individual motives were isolated and programmatically condensed into cycles, sequences and series, and of recent, assembled into electronically generated picture sequences came into existence. These ensembles obtain a completely independent significance within the context of the entire work. On one hand they tell a new story, not necessarily inherent in the work as reproached, and on the other hand shift the act of aesthetic reflection to a meta-level. The camera creates a safe distance between the image object and the seeing eye, objectifying the conflict with socio-political problems in the context of the artwork as a whole. Suddenly artistic strategies of embodying immediate work on the subject are comparable to those which society demands of the individual. They appear as fake and as determined as that painful ritual to which body and soul are wilfully servant. That defuses the explosive nature of the central theme and defers to the author, who questions herself in her photos: By consistently refusing the concretization of desire in every inner vision, she keeps the promise which every art possesses in balance. What remains is curiosity for reality, together with the hope for change.

Edith Almhofer, Gumpoldskirchen, May 2002