

# RENATE BERTLMANN

## UNMASKS SOCIETY

The interrelation of Eros and Thanatos stands at the center of Renate Bertlmann's aesthetic investigations. Her extensive artwork is intended as a trilogy with the title AMO ERGO SUM whose equal parts are titled "Pornography", "Irony", and "Utopia". Her work revolves around the subjects of love, eroticism, and sexuality. She casts light on the innermost realms of the female psyche, making them public and placing them in a social context. From a distinctly female perspective, she represents feelings and desires, addresses the battle of the sexes, un.masks society as being informed by a type of male-determined fetish-obsessed sexuality, and assumes different female and male roles to trace and explore different identities.

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. For an artist like 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. Bertlmann articulates 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 membership. In 1975 she started with the creation of a large number of teat and condom works: inflated condoms positioned in light contact with one another in glass cases, including instructions for re-inflating in case they should "go limp"; teat mats and objects with pushed-in and protruding rubber nipples that can be read as female or male genitals; the photo series and film *Zärtliche Berührungen* [Tender Touches] (p. 271) showing the inflated ends of two condoms caressing and eventually penetrating each other.

Cultural myths perpetuated by analyses of sexual pathologies have provided ample references for artists. The Surrealists for one took Freud's genital hierarchy of castration anxiety and penis envy and transposed it into (artistic) discourses that 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 from 1977 Bertlmann reverses this tradition and renders the absence of the penis part of a historicized 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 black-and-white 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, and Brassai, while ostensibly effacing

the habitual gender distinction between the signifier and the signified of Eros and sex. Instead of the male artist, 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, and installations of the mannequin were intended as ironic comments on a commodity culture that displayed its sexual pathologies through objects that once had been offered up for consumption but had become 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 its breasts are merely indicated as soft forms) is the absence of the penis in the artist, yet 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.

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—taking of the symbolic and displaying it in all its blue-veined, basic physiology. A generation of artists from Louise Bourgeois<sup>1</sup> and Betty Tompkins<sup>2</sup> to Bertlmann, Lynda Benglis,<sup>3</sup> and Shelley Lowell<sup>4</sup> rendered prominent the male member to reverse its phallic power and expose its crude potential to dominate.<sup>5</sup> 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 that prefigured and 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 a 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 loses its power and can easily be subjected to a variety of artistic and formal contemplations—without foregoing its banal but troubling effect on the membership of our present symbolic order.

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<sup>1</sup> Fillette (p. 47), a latex/plaster sculpture of 1968.

<sup>2</sup> The series of Fuck paintings from 1969 to 1974.

<sup>3</sup> The doubled dildo in her Artforum advertisement (p. 27) of 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Homage to Oldenburg – Soft Penis (1973) and the strung up penis in Guilty (1974).

<sup>5</sup> 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 and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, eds., *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass.: MoCA/MIT, 2007), pp. 362–383.