

Rebecca Horn
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Essay by Jack Halberstam

Claudia Illi
Presse & Kommunikation
+ 49 89 21127 115
illi@hausderkunst.de

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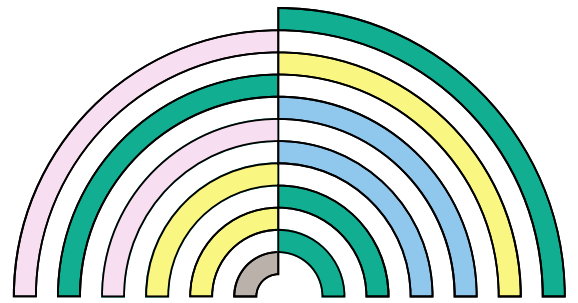
This essay will be published in a forthcoming catalogue in two separate editions in German and English. The fully illustrated book contains installation shots of all the exhibited artworks as well as historical images and archive material. The catalogue contains a series of insightful texts and interviews on the work of Jana Baumann, Hendrik Folkerts, Jack Halberstam, Nancy Specotr and Timothy Baum. The catalogue will be published by Spector Books in July 2024.

Rebecca Horn: Of Unicorns and Anarchy

Two rhinos kissing. A leather mask with pencils attached. Finger gloves that extend the arms into an enormous grasping tool. A dress cage made of tubes filled with blood. A fan that attaches to the torso. A white pointed horn that sits on top of the head. More arm extensions that encase the arms and hands in large red tubular forms that are made of a material that wraps around the body. Masks made of feathers.

Rebecca Horn's magnificent body extensions, most of them generated in the 1970s, comment upon comportment, aesthetic gestures, feminine constriction, fantasies of flight, bodily torsion, and the machinic qualities of the body. Later, she will leave the body out altogether and create machines that make art in the absence of the human. But these early works that see the body as a platform for experiments in shape, movement, and gesture lead the way toward much of the discourse of female bodies and machines that follows.

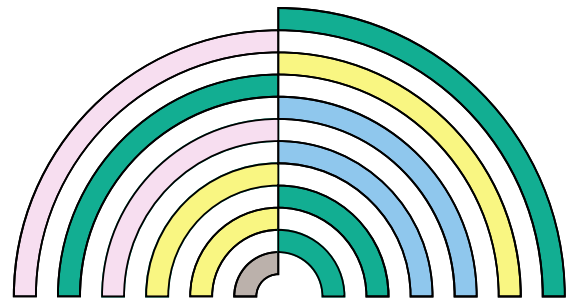
Conventionally, the female android has been a figure of sexual fascination, and she appears within hierarchical structures that, despite dystopian narrative frames, still insist upon male dominance and the association of the female body with animals and artificiality. Take, for example, the original cut of *Blade Runner* (1982) by Ridley Scott. In an important sequence, the main character, Rick Deckard, falls asleep at the piano in his apartment after a long day of pursuing and eliminating fugitive androids. The camera pans the room and we see the silhouette of a rhinoceros on the fire mantle, heaps of papers, glass-framed photographs, and, finally, a piano. Deckard's hand moves across the keys, seemingly detached from his body (represented here only by his head reclining across the piano), a few haunting notes play before the hand stops and a dream fades into view. Out of the mist, and in a forest, a white unicorn runs full tilt at the camera and then swerves off out of frame. Deckard rouses himself from this vision and then turns to the photograph that will lead him to the next replicant he needs to kill. The unicorn shows up once more in the final scene of the film as Deckard and Rachel prepare to flee. Deckard finds an origami figure made from silver paper in his apartment. These figures have been the calling cards of Gaff, the sanguine chief of police, throughout the film and this one poses a final riddle. The folded figure in this last scene is of a unicorn, and as the viewer thinks back to Deckard's dream, they also wonder whether the dream was an implant. Do androids dream of electric sheep? Do humans dream of mythical creatures? Do mythical creatures dream of a world without humans? Will male dominance survive the end of the world?



I begin with *Blade Runner* not because the German artist Rebecca Horn shows any interest in this artifact of popular culture, but because, a decade before the film was released and two years after Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) was published, Horn was playing with much the same imagery but to very different effect. The rhinoceros, the unicorn, the machine, and the artificial human are all key components of Rebecca Horn's work in the 1970s and 1980s. While Hollywood manufactured a future dystopia in which unicorns and androids represent the dreams and nightmares of a polluted, dying, world, Rebecca Horn turns the human body into a platform for very different visions of futurity. Like *Blade Runner*, she links the rhinoceros to the unicorn, and like Philip K. Dick, she ponders the meaning of machine life, but unlike these masculinist visions of nature, femininity, prosthetic extension, and heroic aesthetics, Horn builds on quite different genealogies of embodiment. And so, the horn that appears in her own name and that shows up across her oeuvre signifies less as phallic extension in works like *Unicorn* (1970) and *Kiss of the Rhinoceros* (1989) and more as a commentary on the instrument, the paintbrush, the hand, the head, the lips. Her horns, in other words, are less purely dildonic and more polymorphously perverse prosthetics.

Bodies in Horn's oeuvre, offer themselves as cradles for objects – horns, fans, pencils – and they often eschew the hand/brush relation altogether. In *Pencil Mask* (1972), for example, strips of leather hold pencils in place. Horn describes the mask thus: "Nine straps are tied around my head, three vertically, six horizontally. A pencil is attached at each point where the straps cross. All pencils are about two inches long and reproduce the profile of my face in three dimensions. I move my body rhythmically to and fro in front of a white wall. The pencils make marks on the wall; their image corresponds to the rhythm of my movement."¹¹ The marks left by the pencils record the gesture of negation – a "no" conveyed through the movement of the head from side to side. And in this gesture, one that goes to great lengths to avoid the haptic contact of hand to pencil, pencil to paper, Horn conveys the orientation of her work – the masked artist replaces recognition with obfuscation, touch with mediation, tools with weapons. The medium here – the lead in the pencil – is not *just* the medium, nor is it simply the message; it is a kind of graffiti, the writing on the wall, the inscrutable and coded language of the fembot who has come to claim what is hers.

The female android or cyborg, as I said earlier, has exerted a steadfast fascination since the beginning of the twentieth century. While the male cyborg is just a better and more reliable version of the flawed male body, the fembot represents, for male artists, the fusion of technology and sexuality. In cinema, from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), the female cyborg has been treated as a kind of sex toy. Only in Garland's film *Ex Machina* does the female cyborg operate against type and in defiance of history, to survive her maker's attempts to destroy her and to replace her. Unlike her predecessors, furthermore – Maria in *Metropolis* (1927), Pris and Rachael in *Blade Runner* (1982), the wives in *The Stepford Wives* (1975), and EVE in *Wall-E* (2008) – Ava in *Ex Machina* knows she is a machine, understands how she is controlled, and learns how to manipulate her manipulator. What is more, she knows she is female and she understands what female means to

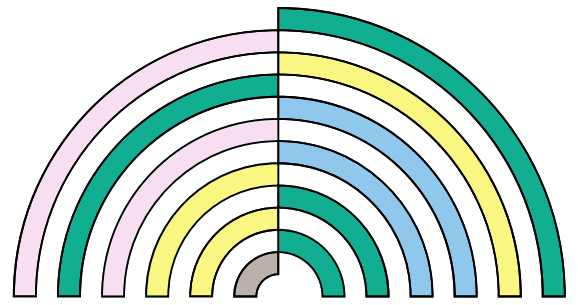


the male engineer who made her and programmed her and others before her, while planning her obsolescence. Garland's film remains tethered nonetheless to the tradition of cinematic fetishizations of the silent feminine automaton. But in Rebecca Horn's work, we never doubt that the machine is intelligent, that she is experimenting and that she is the author of the machinic other and not the invention itself.

The female cyborg has herself long been the object of feminist speculation. Donna Haraway's classic essay from 1985, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," refused to situate the female body on the other side of a set of definitional boundaries organized around a nature/culture split but spilling over in the twentieth century onto the murky terrain of continuities between humans and machines. While earlier versions of feminist thought had situated women and men as opposites and had installed this oppositional logic into all kinds of social networks, including science and technology, Haraway, a scientist by training, smashed through not only a skein of essentialist ideas but a structure of essentialism that marked entire arenas of human behavior as masculine or feminine. According to such ideological systems, women represented an authentic form of embodiment that was close to nature, a source of nurture, and a barrier between the human and the machinic. Haraway turned this logic around and declared: "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess."ⁱⁱ

But the cyborg was not simply a feminist fantasy or a rhetorical shift for Haraway. She wrote: "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics."ⁱⁱⁱ We are all already cyborgs, in other words. But a decade earlier than even this prescient feminist statement, Rebecca Horn had delved deep into the machine/body relationship and had fully explored the machinic extensions of the female body that disrupt the easy equation of femaleness to nature.

Horn was very much a part of feminist "body art" experiments of the 1970s that pulled the female body out of the seemingly inevitable association with the natural, the nonviolent, and the maternal. Horn's work can be read alongside that of Marina Abramović and Yoko Ono, *VALIE EXPORT* and Ana Mendieta. But while Abramović in *Rhythm 0* (1974) and Ono in *Cut Piece* (1964) used their bodies as a kind of bait to draw out antisocial masculinist behaviors, Rebecca Horn saw the female body as a site of abundant creativity that could be channeled and directed by prosthetic attachments. Traces of Ana Mendieta's body sculptures can be discerned in Horn's work, but Horn steered away from the natural landscapes that Mendieta favored, and she also tended not to directly address male violence against women. Instead, Horn's sculptures force us to think about the body kinetically or in relation to repetitive motion. Her prosthetically enhanced bodies are expressive and they comment on nature rather than symbolizing it; they incorporate machinic elements rather than being absorbed by them. The motifs of flapping, scratching, scraping, fluttering, spraying, and marking express themselves through Horn's sculptures and threaten to overwhelm the body with their signifying systems. Like the music that flows from

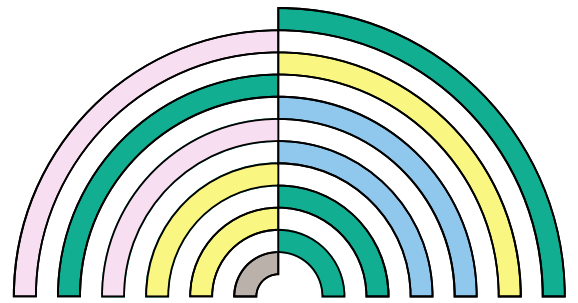


objects in her later works, separate from a musician, these bodily architectures speak through the flesh and of the flesh, but rarely as flesh.

As many critics have commented, in her twenties Horn suffered from a lung infection after being exposed to toxins in her early work with polyester and fiberglass. This led to her being hospitalized, and in her isolation, she began her bodily experiments. Physical infirmity and vulnerability in Horn's work resonates with Frida Kahlo's gorgeous paintings of her own collapsing bodily architectures, and even echoes through Eva Hesse's synthetic, fiberglass sculptures and their loopy, abstract forms. But while so many other female artists doubled down on the organic body with all of its frailty, Horn uses her extensions to suggest strength, supernatural potential, magical capabilities, and aesthetic prowess. Even when Horn leaves the body behind in kinetic sculptures like *Kiss of the Rhinoceros*, we still sense abundance and possibility rather than mechanical reduction and absence. As the elongated metal arms bring the rhinoceros horns closer and closer together, the tension, sexual and otherwise, builds and generates its own frisson separate from the electric buzzing that accompanies their eventual kiss. The buzz is akin to the sound made by cicadas in one register but remains discernably nonorganic and electric in another. The kiss, furthermore, a nonhuman kiss, the union of two horns severed from anybody whatsoever, is satisfyingly nonreproductive, nonheterosexual (they are the same kind of organ and refuse all suggestions of complementarity), and noncommunicative. This is a kiss without intimacy, touch without flesh, sexuality without bodies.

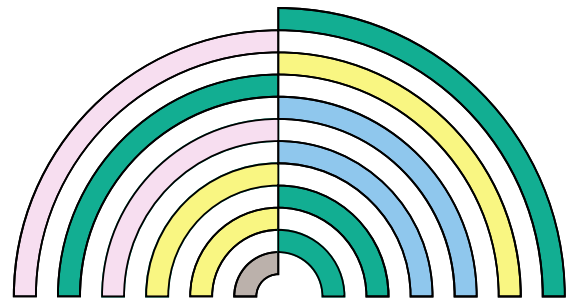
And on the theme of no bodies, what happens when Horn leaves the body out of the picture altogether? Eschewing and poking at notions of virtuosity, Horn created a machine that sprays ink over platforms of books that lie open waiting to receive the "word." This work, *Flying Books Under Black Rain Painting*, installed at the Harvard Art Museums in 2014, features a machine that sprays black ink across the wall in the gallery and onto the open books. The books were chosen by the artist for this installation and were: Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, Franz Kafka's *Amerika*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. These books, each one preoccupied with the self and cities, journeys and writing, become surfaces for the falling black rain and provide evidence of the work after it has been completed and the machine dismantled. The self, in each book, refuses to appear in a coherent form and, in at least one of the works, goes missing. The choice of these books, therefore, offers a wry commentary on the artist as a nonessential component to the work of art which, once set up, will proceed without any singular and coherent self to guide it.

While Jackson Pollock's splashes of paint were understood as complex expressions of a heroic self, Horn's splashes of black ink rain down upon already written books, looking not for confirmation of their greatness or their virtuosic intention, but looking only for a place to land. By spattering ink across the writings of great male authors, furthermore, Horn's machine is like a graffiti generator, and the automatic writing that it generates scrawls messages of disruption and obliteration across the already written major texts of culture and the walls of the elite institute that stages this encounter.



Never satisfied to just offer role reversals, women for men, mechanism for human art, randomness for intentional gestures, Rebecca Horn's machines are clearly in conversation with the inventions of Marcel Duchamp, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and Fritz Lang, but, as Nancy Spector points out in her essay "Neither Bachelors Nor Brides" in the 1993 Guggenheim Museum exhibition catalogue, Horn's "machines approach in spirit Donna Haraway's feminist techno-myth of radical, gender-smashing female cyborgs, who appropriate 'male' technology for their own emancipatory ends."^{iv} I would push this even further and leave out "male technology" and just say "technology" in order to indicate that Horn's agenda concerns the machine and gender but not the gendered machine. Horn herself, indeed, describes her machines in an interview with Germano Celant as "melancholic actors performing in solitude."^v In that same interview, she describes a remarkable piece involving these lonely melancholic machine performers. The piece was staged in 1987 in a bricked-up tower in Münster, Germany. The tower was a place that had served as a holding cell for prisoners during the Second World War, and Horn discovered that people had been tortured and killed in that place. This site in Münster, then, would have resonated for Horn, and when she pushed her hosts to open up the site to her for an installation, it became something of a "scandal," in her words.^{vi} But Horn insisted on accessing the space, and when they opened up the abandoned building, they found new vegetation, a garden, trees. Horn transformed the space by creating what she called a *Concert in Reverse* in which "forty silver hammers" were "banging on the walls of the prison cells like a communication from the past."^{vii} There were other components, too, that added to the symphony echoing through the haunted walls of the tower – dripping water, flickering candles, a black pond, and even two pythons who were periodically fed mice.

The absurdity of some of Horn's constructions – think of the pythons at the center of the *Concert in Reverse* – references the unconscious, the forbidden, the strange juxtapositions that art allows and that can create odd atmospheres which menace or soothe, jar or confirm. Like one of her inspirations, Buster Keaton, the comic actor best known for his deadpan comedy within a genre – silent film – that depended upon extravagant gestures, Horn works with contradiction and contraption. Keaton, she reminds one interviewer, was known for "building absurd machines" and it is this sensibility that she transfers into her own practices.^{viii} The absurd machine is a vehicle for the exposure of the irrationalities of capitalism – the work that is carried out for its own sake (meaningless bureaucracy), which she parodies in *Blue Monday Strip* (1993), made up of a series of dangling typewriters that chatter on even without the presence of typists. And the absurd machine is also a reference to the cool anarchistic currents that circulate just beneath the surface of human activity, threatening to turn the organized harmonies of human sense-making projects back into noise. Take *Concert for Anarchy* (1990), for example, a crowd-pleasing variation on Raphael Montañez Ortiz's *Duncan Terrace Piano Destruction Concert* (1966), in which the artist "played" the piano by destroying it and drawing from it a wild cacophony of sound in the process. For her ritual destruction of the instrument, Horn has the piano spit out its keys at regular intervals. The Tate website describes the piece as follows:



A grand piano is suspended upside down from the ceiling by heavy wires attached to its legs. It hangs solidly yet precariously in mid-air, out of reach of a performer, high above the gallery floor.

A mechanism within the piano is timed to go off every two to three minutes, thrusting the keys out of the keyboard in a cacophonous shudder. The keys, ordinarily the point of tactile contact with the instrument, fan disarmingly out into space. At the same time, the piano's lid falls open to reveal the instrument's harp-like interior, the strings reverberating at random. This unexpected, violent act is followed between one and two minutes later by a retraction as the lid closes and the keys slide back into place, tunelessly creaking as they go. Over time, the piano repeats the cycle. A mounting tension to the moment of release is followed by a slow retreat to stasis as the piano closes itself up like a snail withdrawing into its shell.^{ix}

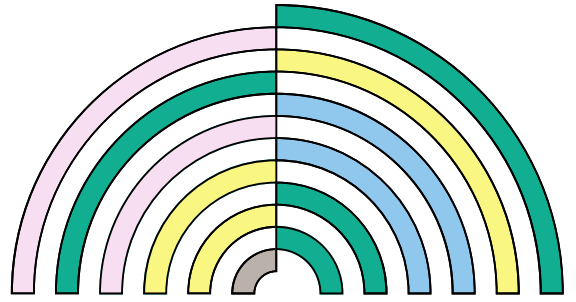
This performance of the piano by the piano is one in which all the keys play themselves at once. No solo performer sits and displays his virtuosity; rather, absent a musician altogether, the piano plays and plays from a position precariously situated above the spectator and hanging over them. The music issues from nowhere and everywhere. It has no composition and is all composition. It plays the piano as if the piano had but one song and that song were everything – raining, like paint, down upon the gallery and the spectators and the art world and the human, and washing us in sound, and willing us to hear in this sound, the sound of making and unmaking, being and coming undone. These concerts refuse the “work” of art and the age of mechanical reproduction, and the aura and the original, and they usher us into the odd world of unicorns and anarchy.

ⁱ Sandra Beate Reimann, ed., *Rebecca Horn: Body Fantasies*, exh. cat. Museum Tinguely (Vienna: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2019), p. 106.

ⁱⁱ Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149–81, esp. p. 181.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

^{iv} Nancy Spector, “Neither Bachelors Nor Brides: The Hybrid Machines of Rebecca Horn,” in *Rebecca Horn*, exh. cat. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York: Guggenheim, 1993), pp. 54–67, esp. pp. 59–60.



^v Rebecca Horn with Germano Celant, “The Bastille Interviews I: Paris 1993,” in Guggenheim 1993, pp. 14–22, esp. p. 18.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 20.

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} Rebecca Horn with Stuart Morgan, “The Bastille Interviews II: Paris 1993,” in Guggenheim 1993, pp. 24–30, esp. p. 29.

^{ix} Rebecca Horn, *Concert for Anarchy*, 1990, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/horn-concert-for-anarchy-t07517>.