

Rebecca Horn

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Text about the exhibition

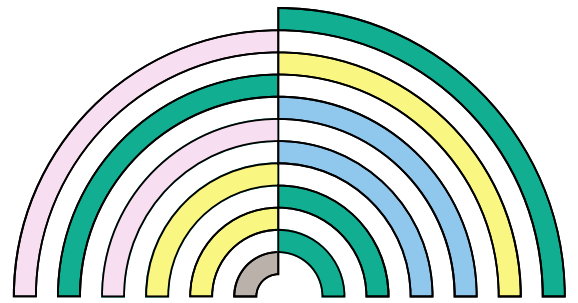
Spanning six decades, the transmedial oeuvre of Rebecca Horn (b. 1944) deals with the theme of existence in the face of blurring boundaries between nature and culture, technology and biological capital, the human and the non-human. Whether one describes the artist as an inventor, director, author, composer, or poet, she sees herself first and foremost as a choreographer. Horn describes her artistic practice as carefully calculated relationships of space, light, physicality, sound, and rhythm, which come together to form an orchestration. In her performative, sculptural, and filmic works, the acts of becoming a machine, becoming an animal, or becoming the Earth aim at the stimuli of a visible, tangible, and audible existence that can be experienced through the body – an incarnated understanding. Living matter is Horn's primary resource, from her creative beginnings to the later material choreographies.

With her performances and sculptures, Horn subjects humans and machines, as well as humans and animals, to a parallelism, which can thus be interpreted as elements of political technologies. She confronts human potential and creativity with mechanisms of the suppression and destruction of diverse forms of life. In retrospect, her search for alternative ways of thinking can be understood as a significant artistic contribution to new social and ethical forms of subject formation beyond humanistic concepts of the ideal.

Three decades after the outstanding retrospective of Rebecca Horn's, a collaboration between the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, and the Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna, and other international presentations focusing on specific aspects of her oeuvre, the exhibition *Rebecca Horn* organised by Haus der Kunst, develops a reading dedicated to performativity, which plays an equally significant role from her beginnings to her most recent works.

The exhibition opens with newly digitised film footage of her early work. With *Performances I* (1972) and *II* (1973) in the early 1970s, Horn devoted herself to the controllability and expansion of the body, evoking alien sensations by means of wearable sculptural cotton and material constructions. Movements of fantastic grace or threatening pain emerged, as in *Unicorn* (1970-1972) and *Head Extension* (1972), presented at *documenta 5* (1972) by Harald Szeemann. They both feature unusual postures and movements, some of which are borrowed from classical stage dance, and offer a glimpse of an illusionistic approach to the world, since Horn herself practised ballet for a time.

She celebrates the power of transformation by acting out different identities and actions. Horn experiments with a dual nature of human and animal, as in *Moveable Shoulder Extensions* (1971), *Feather Instrument* (1972), *Cockatoo Mask* (1973), and *Cockfeather Mask* (1973). The actions with masks, bandages, and feathers open up a host of associations that recall fetishized practices, at least those that break taboos and rules – general social structures of order and gender categorisations. Horn uses the tense relationship between intimacy and public display as a stage for presenting nudity as a moment of the highest sensoriality in order to transfer codes and systems



of seeing, hearing, and touching into new experiential spaces – beyond the skin as a socially determined surface of expression of shame and morality.

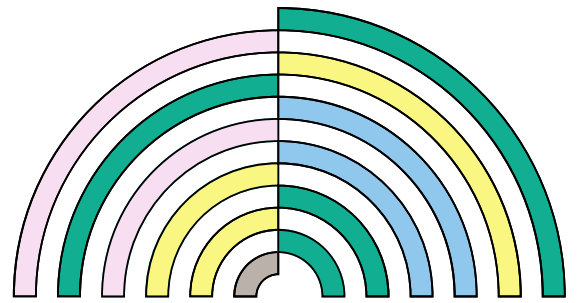
With her two oldest sculptures, such as *Measure Box* (1970), she had previously explored the unification of spatial and body art with the three-dimensional moulding of contact data of her own body shape. In the same way, in *Overflowing Blood Machine* (1970) she already explored the dissolving boundaries between man and machine. A biological cycle is transformed into a technical one.

Following her studies at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts (HFBK), Horn worked for her first performances with actors, artists, and models such as Veruschka von Lehndorff, KP Brehmer, Otto Sander, and Sigmar Polke.

She discovered film as an experimental medium. The New York atelier converted into a ballet studio, where she lived for over a decade, alternating with Berlin, served as the setting for her film *Der Eintänzer* (1978). Ballet is omnipresent in the film's storyline, culminating in the exercises of young women dancers who, tied together by strings, undergo mechanistic movement control. Here, the individual no longer corresponds with her own body – a programmatic symbol. In the exercises, which are determined by perfection and synchronicity, the individual becomes completely irrelevant. Horn uses the symbolic capacity of movements from the language of dance as a medium and catalyst for her choreographic fictions. Thus, for the first time, she carried out the purported transfer of human action to an object with the help of a motorised, tango-dancing table that feigns parallel strands of action. In addition, a ballerina undergoes a transformation into a bird in *The Feathered Prison Fan* (1978), a feather machine in which the boundaries between the creatures become fluid.

Horn uses the idea of physical incorporation and has been creating symbols of technical-bodily networking with her mechanical sculptures since the early 1980s. In her work, modes of perception and action seem to metaphorically intertwine with contemporary technologies. With both industrial and choreographic processes, she makes use of the decomposition of work and movement sequences. Through rhythmic repetitions of moving sculptures, Horn creates symbolic figures, as in the practice of dance. She achieves a frighteningly technoid embodiment of sexuality and affectivity. For example, the monumental aluminium *Peacock Machine* (1982) exhibited at *documenta 7* features an imitation of a courtship display of a peacock – she had previously staged the prototype from 1979 for the first time in her film *La Ferdinanda* (1981) with original animal feathers. Horn generates new human-animal relations with machines performing human gestures in abstracted animal form, as in *Kiss of the Rhinoceros* (1989) and *Beetles in Conversation* (1988). She makes visible entire networks of human and non-human actors, as in *Oyster Piano* (1992). Horn scrutinises the position of humans as one of many natural species, eluding the subjective but not the emotional.

Skilfully woven references from literature and the history of art and film run through her entire oeuvre. Horn celebrates the horror of machines as a continuation of the body, recalling monsters from poetry and science. Without a doubt, she creates existences of the unrepresentable with her works and gives a face to the abysmal.



In the four decades that followed Theodor W. Adorno's statement that writing a poem after Auschwitz was barbaric (1951), she dedicated herself to the dignified commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust with various site-specific works, such as *Concert for Buchenwald. Part 1 Tram Depot* (1999) and *Concert for Buchenwald. Part 2 Schloss Ettersburg* (1999). Similarly, with *Tower of the Nameless* (1994), she commemorated those affected by the post-Yugoslavian wars of that time, demanding physical and mental empathy through sound and discord. In *Inferno* (1993), hospital beds stacked up to fourteen metres high are arranged as a sculpture removed from the mundane, visualising the madness of human suffering and, with a storm of electric lightning, representing an immersive spatial installation typical of the 1990s. Horn constantly restages music, broken down into its composition, just as she draws inspiration from dance choreography. In Horn's work, deconstruction becomes constructive, as can be impressively experienced with the clashing tones and rhythms in *Concert for Anarchy* (2006).

Horn transforms an artistic act characterised by supposed genius, in which she lets the *The Painting Machine: Aria in Black* (1991), create unpredictable murals by combining ink and champagne from two glass funnels using a mechanised, dancing syringe construction. Horn generates an automatism, which leaves an artistic design to chance – and yet is subject to externalised control. With her *The Prussian Bride Machine* (1988), she created a significant counter-image to the 'Bachelor Machine' in Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915-1923), where sexual and mechanical realms are given a masculine assignment. Horn revises the performativity of gender.

Circle for Broken Landscape (1997) refers - in a metaphorical sense - to the collapse of numerous ecosystems as a result of a centuries-long history of subjugation and exploitation of nature. At the same time, Horn draws attention to the entanglement of systems of oppression along the hierarchical axes of culture and nature, humans and animals. Alchemy as the teachings of the structure of matter exerts a great fascination on Horn, who is also familiar with Joseph Beuys's anthroposophical world view. For *Hydra Piano* (1995), a steel basin filled with mercury, the liquid moves like a snake with the help of integrated motors; and in *Mirror of the Lake* (2004), a multitude of spatial perspectives becomes a transcendental experience. In the work of Horn, alchemical, physical, or spatial hybrids become allegories, reflecting the relationships of different species in a shared universe.

With her last major group of works, *Hauchkörper* (2017), she creates minimalist brass rods that derive from human measurement and dance in a quiet, asynchronous rhythm as moving bodies as if in the wind. The exhibition concludes with this late work, in which she transforms her artistic grammar into an abstracted choreography full of poetry and grace.

Rebecca Horn's oeuvre is a lifelong and topical echo of the advancing decentration of humanity. She thematises the interaction of the senses and places the sensuality of the body situated in relation to the environment at the centre of her life's work with the means of performativity. With concepts of deconstruction, Horn makes possible alternative self-images that search for new notions of community within a cosmic whole.