

RENATE BERLMANN

EXHIBITION TEXTS

EXPERIMENTS IN DEFIANT FEMALE RESILIENCE

Inspired by feminist literature, but also by plays such as Bertolt Brecht's *A Respectable Wedding* and Thomas Bernhard's *A Party for Boris*, Renate Bertlmann developed a characteristic vocabulary already in the early years of her artistic practice: Forms and motifs such as the phallus, the vulva, and the breast, bride and groom, the wheelchair, the pacifier, and the scalpel blade remain constants in her examination of male dominance and petty bourgeois morality to this day. Bertlmann uses the figure of the heavily pregnant bride and the symbol of the wheelchair as a strategic critique of the repression of women. On the other hand, the artist creates strong images of defiant female resilience with her protest objects, that—equipped with sharp blades—counter the aggressive dimensions of male sexuality. At the same time, she also develops pieces that tell of deep feelings, intimacy, and tenderness in dealing with oneself and a counterpart.

ANGER AND TENDERNESS

Ambivalences, oppositions, and contradictions in the roles that society imposes on women but also in the conflicting feelings as regards the body and the psyche preoccupy Renate Bertlmann in various series of works in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, in photographic self-stagings created in the privacy of her studio, she explores both autoerotic moments as well as forms of cross-dressing and gender fluidity. Bertlmann's radical performances in front of an audience, however, had a highly provocative potential in particular when she addressed issues of male sexuality, the phallus, and the clergy. Unabashed, she appropriated the patriarchy's poses and symbols, up to and including the crucifix, in order to expose misogyny and hostility towards the body. In contrast, she called for an alternative view on our being in which body, mind, and soul are treated as the three equal parts of a whole, which is expressed in her interest in the fragility of human existence.

VULNERABILITY AND IDIOSYNCRASY

In all their ruthlessness, Renate Bertlmann's radical and provocative works from the outset also tackle existential questions—indeed, her pieces combine feminism and spirituality. Time and again, the artist addresses longing, vulnerability, and loss. For example, in a series of photographs she stages her veiled body, while in sculptural objects she draws on the aesthetics of final resting places. Urns, graves, and coffins all constitute key elements of her formal vocabulary. Bertlmann's obsessive preoccupation with concrete images of the body gives way here to her great interest in everything beyond the physical, the eternal cycle of growth and decay. She creates crucial installations and group of works on the topics of birth and death, for which precisely the skin-like properties of materials such as latex form an important point of departure. The idiosyncratic appearance of these appealing and likewise repugnant works attests to Bertlmann's joy in ironic alienation, from which the pieces derive their subversive force.

KITSCH AS A PLEASURABLE BREACH OF TABOOS

While Renate Bertlmann initially made only sparse use of elements of purportedly bad taste, from the late 1980s onwards she adopted the formal vocabulary of kitsch as her preferred artistic language. Excessively using brash colors and unusual materials, she developed new approaches to the themes and motifs that had interested her all along. For example, in dealing with symbols and agencies of the patriarchy, she broke taboos in an emphatically playful manner, deploying the strategy of kitsch as an ironic weapon, thus also questioning established concepts of art. During this period, Bertlmann undertook a "trilogical" division of her entire oeuvre into three areas and along three colors: Pornography, in signal red, narrates the war of the sexes; irony, connoted in yellow, traces desires and aggressions; utopia, coded blue, summarizes exercises in moderation and asceticism to the point of death itself. All of Renate Bertlmann's works, however, share her programmatic leitmotif: "amo ergo sum" ("I love therefore I am").