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The skin of memory

Throughout her life, Heidi Bucher (1926-1993) produced a vast oeuvre focusing on the body and its relationship to architecture, experiential space and hapticity from a feminist, critical and activist perspective.

Although her trajectory started in 1956, it was after her stay in New York in the early 1960s and then in her native Switzerland and in Los Angeles during the following decade, that Heidi Bucher produced an entire oeuvre which, in a certain sense, built an anthropology of sculpture as well as an aesthetic that addresses both individual sensibility and the sharing that generates a notion of collectiveness.

Heidi Bucher belongs fully to the second avantgardes and their more prominent questions – the importance of process, the fluidity between the production of devices, their performative use and the political awareness of the notions of community and difference. Indeed, she opened a path that begins with the construction of dwellings for the body and then goes on to focus on the use of latex and the moulding of spaces and bodies.

The start of her trajectory was marked by the creation of cocoons, 'soft', ductile sculptures that served simultaneously as individual shelters and wearable sculptural pieces, sometimes made in collaboration with her husband, sculptor Carl Bucher.

A first insight ensuing from this transformation of sculpture (traditionally structural and rigid) into an object that envelops, protects and metamorphizes the body, is that for Bucher the core of the sculptural work is not the object, but its inhabitability either by the artist or by another agent, which leads her to produce a transitive art eminently geared towards usability. The second insight is that the notion of mould, that which precedes sculpture (like Bruce Nauman was doing at the time, albeit resorting to different processes), allows for a gradual orientation of the object towards an anthropology of the body and of sculpture itself as memory.

From the early 1970s onwards, already in Zurich (in a studio that had, interestingly, been a former butcher's shop), Heidi Bucher created a series of works called 'soft' sculptures which she titled "Einbalsamierungen" (Embalming), a complex taxidermy resorting to textiles, fragments of clothing that had belonged to her family (an aspect that would prove vital in the future), shells and natural found elements, to produce dubious metaphorical bodies.

In 1976, as she followed along this path Bucher began her first projects using latex to mould architectural elements and build drapery-like fluid versions of latex moulded on architectural spaces. For the first of these projects, she moulded the door of her Zurich studio and called it "Borg" (Die Türe zum Borg, 1976) [Borg (Door to the Borg) 1976]; the symbolic access to a protected space of retreat.

The most significant space moulding projects using latex was the creation of a mould of her family home (walls and floor), which began in 1972/3. The first space chosen by the artist in that home, which marked her bourgeois origin, was the gentlemen's study, the "Herrenzimmer", 1978-82, a piece signalling her distance from patriarchal family structure and mapping the social and power relationships she wanted to expose.

The discovery of this process, which is related to developments in the work of other coeval artists such as Eva Hesse, Lynda Banglis, Judy Chicago, gradually defined a long path towards the creation of symbolic spaces that also displayed sensitivity and aesthetical

sophistication. This symbolic character is also apparent in her choice of Ludwig Binswanger's office at the clinic by the shore of Lake Constance, where so many figures were received, from Sigmund Freud to German historian Aby Warburg, who was an inpatient there in the 1920s.

Bucher's complex methodology in creating these liquid moulds is akin to taking the skin off the architectural structure; a skin created and removed by the artist – a skinning of the space. The result is a negative impression of the architectural space, as Rachel Whiteread would later do, albeit ductile and suspended. This process produces a skin that retains the building's memory and, in the installation process, creates a fragile architecture doomed to collapse. One could say that Heidi Bucher's oeuvre moved towards the fibrillation of the experience of space by charging her fragile latex architecture with an intensity that tells the phantasmatic narratives of the moulded spaces themselves. The fact that the artist used these latex 'skins' in performances only confirms the idea that her focus was always the relationship between the body and the space it secretes by seeking to find pathways between the individual haptic experience and the understanding of historical processes of domination and control that had never been metaphorized but always alluded to.

The skin of Heidi Bucher's works is, therefore, the haptic form of memory recollection which, in the skinning process, is materialized in its full symbolic potency.

Delfim Sardo

Heidi Bucher (Adelheid Hildegard Müller; Winterthur, 1926 – Brunnen, 1993) is a fundamental artist of the international neo-avant-garde whose work deserves to be rediscovered. The sculptural and performative material transformations made by the Swiss artist rendered visible the dynamic relationships of bodies and spaces. Through a processual mode of working and radical use of materials, Bucher investigated how human forms of existence are embedded in social and intimate power structures. She saw the skin as an interface to the world, a sensory repository of memory, be it of pleasure or pain, comfort or unease, and used latex as a material to bypass objectification and embrace the metaphorical. With her latex skinning, Heidi Bucher's interest shifted to the interplay between the identity-forming function of architecture and the human body – visually represented through a fusion of the organic and the static, the amorphous and the geometric. Her oeuvre bears witness to the artistic discovery and emancipation of the sensual, sensitive body in the twentieth century, whereby she positioned herself with her work beyond traditional gender roles within the international art historiography of the present and at the same time found pioneering forms of expression.

Heidi Bucher work is included in numerous museums and collections worldwide, including The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; Kunsthau Zürich, Zurich; Kunsthau Zug; Kunstmuseum Lucerne; Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Migrosmuseum für Gegenwartskunst Zürich, Zurich; Haus der Kunst München, Munich, among others. Solo exhibitions (selection): 2025 Jahn und Jahn, Lisbon; 2024 Mendes Wood DM, Paris; 2024 Jahn und Jahn, Munich; 2024 MCDA Museum Contemporary Art and Design, Manila, Philippines; 2023 Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing, China; 2023 Lehmann Maupin, Seoul; 2023 Art Sonje Center, Seoul; 2022 Muzeum Susch, CH; 2022 Mendes Wood DM, Brussels; 2022 Kunstmuseum Bern; 2021 Haus der Kunst, Munich; 2020 Mendes Wood DM; 2019 Alma Zevi, Venice; 2019 The Approach, London; 2019 Gallery Lehmann Maupin, New York; 2018 Parasol Unit, London; 2017 Fundaziun Not Vital Ardez, CH; 2015 Freymond-Guth Fine Arts, Zurich; 2014 Swiss Institute Contemporary, New York; 2014 Alexander Gray Associates, New York; 2013 Freymond-Guth Fine Arts, Zurich; 2013 Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris; 2013 Freymond-Guth Fine Arts, Art Basel; 2007 Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin; 2004 Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich; 1995 Kunsthau, Barlach Halle K, Hamburg; 1993 Villa Bleuler, Galerie im Weissen Haus, Winterthur; 1993 Kunstmuseum Thurgau, CH; 1983 Kunstmuseum Winterthur; 1981 Galerie Maeght, Zurich; 1979 Galerie Maeght, Zurich; 1979 Galerie Numaga, Auvier, CH; 1977 Galerie Maeght, Zurich; 1973 Esther Bear Gallery, Santa Barbara, CA; 1972 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; 1971 Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York; 1971 Rothmans Art Gallery of Stratford, Toronto; 1971 Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montréal; 1958 World House Galleries, New York; 1956 Galerie Suzanne Feigel, Basel.