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Writing performance : on relations between texts and performances

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Interview with Renate Bertlmann

The following text is the edited version of a recorded interview with the Austrian artist Renate Bertlmann about the relation of live performance and photography in Bertlmann's work in the 70ties and 80ties. The interview was conducted in Vienna in August 2014 in German Language.

Lilo Nein: We might take a photograph of *The Pregnant Bride in the Wheelchair* (*Die schwangere Braut im Rollstuhl*) from 1978, which I found during my research, as the starting point of our conversation. When I saw this picture, I was sure that I had seen it before and that it documented a live performance. The only irritating thing was that there was no audience in this one. I asked myself whether the photo had been taken from a different perspective, whether it had been deliberately framed without the audience. Or had the audience simply been airbrushed out? Later on, I found two photographs on your website, each part of a different series: one of the bride with an audience – documenting a performance – and one of the bride without an audience, a studio photograph. Both pictures are indeed quite similar, but it becomes clear within the series that each image has a different status with regard to your artistic practice. A performance took place in both cases – a performance that was captured on camera, so we have an action and a materialized view of this action – and yet one of them is a staged photograph and the other is a live performance documented by someone else.

What is the relationship between photographic and performative practice in your art?

Renate Bertlmann: It's a complex relationship, because these media interlock in many different ways, and these interrelationships change in the course of time. I consider my staged photographs performances as well. They're studio performances. I made them mostly in the 1970s and the live performances afterwards, in the late 1970s, early 1980s.

I did my first studio performance in 1969, entitled *Transformations* (*Verwandlungen*). In this work, I used different clothes and utensils that belonged to my mother and posed for the camera with them. The reason I did this was that my mother forced me to wear certain clothes as a child. She told me which clothes to buy or sewed clothes for me, which I then had to wear: from nightgowns all the way to costumes. In this

photo series, I reflect this situation and try to interpret it ironically. For me, this was an action, as they used to call it in the 70s, an action before the camera. It gave me joy to act this out; this action was primarily about the feelings I had when I did this private little fashion show. The material output of my action – that is to say, the photographs – was not that important to me. The medium of photography has always accompanied me; I grew up with it and took it for granted. The camera has always been the extension of my arm. I used it like a pencil or a brush. My uncle was very artistic; already as a young man he had taken photographs. He gave me my first camera and helped me develop my first photographs as a child in the bathroom. Our bathroom was a witch's kitchen ... I have always also explored my objects photographically, circling them, so to speak, to see what I was doing there or to unlock a level of meaning that I had not been conscious of. I was able to analyze all this with photography. Of course I also photographed my performances in order not to lose the moment entirely. But these pictures were never about the photography, and always about the reflection of what I was doing. In the pictures, I saw what I was doing then and there, and what these actions were transporting.

LN: Could an attending audience have taken over this function of the outside look? Would performing this action have been thinkable before an audience?

RB: No, an audience could never have given me this outside look. The camera is more objective; it merely produces a statement of fact. If I ask ten people from the audience how they perceived my action, each person would make a different statement.

LN: Ten different camera angles would also make ten different statements about the action.

RB: Yes, that's true. But the camera does not judge me. It shows what I am doing in that instant. While the camera is also a weapon, it basically does not do anything to me. I was incredibly vulnerable in those moments, but nobody was there who could have hurt me. The intimate space of the studio has given me the opportunity to perform this action. I was able to move around freely, to truly expose myself.

LN: How has your relationship between photography and performative action developed in the following years?

RB: From 1969 to 1974, I only used photography for documentary purposes. I used the photographs from my series of *Transformations* for collages. Additionally, I made quite a few objects or parts of objects at that time. In 1974 I made a worm that I used for an object as late as 1980. I used this worm to improvise in my second studio performance. I just wrapped it around my neck and twisted it. That was when the photo series *Skinings (Häutungen)* was created. One might say that my performances evolved from my object-making activities. I always acted with my own objects as well as with ready-mades. I collected a large number of sex toys, mostly dildos. I also made photo series with them later; *Chanson d'Amour* was one of them, for instance. There are many cross-references between the objects, photographs, and performances: The double-headed dildo with the vibrating handle – a ready-made I played with in this studio performance – was reused in a live performance *Sling Shot Action*. In 1976, I made *Tender Pantomimes (Zärtliche Pantomime)* in the studio. That was a very intimate work in which I sat on the floor, at times with legs spread-eagled. I had pacifier-fingers on my hands and a mask-object on my face or between my legs that was also made of self-cast latex pacifier objects. I processed these latex objects into other objects and also reused them in the live performances later on.

LN: What is the main thing you had in mind in these studio performances: improvising with your body and its impulses or the photographic image that was to be created in that instant?

RB: Both. I had no strict stage direction, no instructions to myself, but I had carefully selected the objects beforehand. Performing in the moment, I let myself be inspired by the objects. It was a kind of spontaneous action that was guided and led by the choice of objects.

LN: How would one picture this situation in which the photography does not interrupt or disturb the playful exploration process?

RB: Well, it didn't, because the act of taking photographs corresponds with my personal work rhythm. I'm a very fast worker; I just go with the flow of the shutter button's click. Then it goes, pow-pow-pow, click-click-click! As soon as I think about the process, it's over for me. Of course, I knew what I was doing there, why I was doing it, and what I wanted to express. I was very clear and open about what I

wanted to do from the get-go. But in the process, I use a lot of intuition; instants when “reason” crept into my process were very rare. What’s remarkable about this is that there was no photographic waste in these works: every photo worked, always! One time, a photo inexplicably turned out to be out of focus, but apart from that, every image worked, also the framing. Even in the *Renée or René (Renée ou René)* series from 1977, in which I am posing in menswear in front of a table. I always went back and forth to the camera to click the release button, and without making a mark on the floor, I always returned to the correct spot.

When I was doing the *Renée or René* series, I never thought about exhibiting the photographs, because topics like masturbation, seduction, and rape are so intimate. I could only do this series at home. Afterwards, I left the output at home for two years as contact prints, looking at them with a magnifying glass. When I had enough of them, I decided to have them all enlarged to life size.

LN: There were five performances from 1977 to 1982. How did you go from intimate acting for the camera to a direct confrontation with the audience?

RB: I had become more courageous, and I wanted to confront the audience, see their reactions. The difference to a camera, among other things, is that you can feel the atmosphere in the room, the contact with the audience. My contact with the audience has slowly intensified. For my first performance, *Defloration in 14 Stations (Deflorazione in 14 Stazioni)*, I acted behind a wall and all the audience could see were my hands. Somehow that wasn’t enough for me, though, and I tried to actively involve the audience more in subsequent performances. In hindsight, I was quite pushy in doing that. I had conceived the performances in such a way that the audience had to participate. In *The Pregnant Bride in the Wheelchair* I had a big belly and sat in a wheelchair, which had a sign attached that read, “Please push” (“*Bitte schieben*”). When nobody from the audience pushed me, the baby in my belly began to scream so loud until somebody pushed me. The baby in my belly was a loudspeaker ... I had a cassette recorder by my side, which I turned on whenever I needed. People weren’t able to take the screaming very long. In this performance, I used many different objects I had developed in my three-dimensional practice: attached to the cassette recorder was a rope that I laid around the room, building an arena for myself. The rope was wrapped in umbilical cords made of cast latex. And I always wore parts of my objects: a pacifier mask, a pacifier crown, pacifier hands.

In the performance *The Pregnant Bride with the Collection Bag* (*Die schwangere Braut mit dem Klingelbeutel*) at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in 1978, I used a collection bag in the shape of a huge condom – which again was a latex object I had cast myself – to collect money from the audience for the *Relic of St. Erectus* (*Reliquie des Hl. Erectus*). St. Erectus was mounted to the wall, a collection box mounted beneath it. I kept going through the crowd, importunately collecting their money, which I then put in the collection box. In return, I gave the donors a small devotional picture of St. Erectus. When people did not donate, the baby in my belly started screaming at the top of its lungs.

The performance *Let's Dance Together* had me tied to a wheelchair. I tried to free myself, which wasn't easy, because I had made sure the rope was really tight, and I kept trying until someone from the audience had mercy and helped me. In the *Sling Shot Action* at Franklin Furnace in New York in 1980, I forced the audience to dance with me and a doll. This element of interaction was very important in my live performances; it played a central role in these works.

LN: Have your live performances also caused you to reflect on the objects or to perceive them differently, like the photographs have done for your studio performances?

RB: Yes, that's exactly what happened. One example was the pacifier crown the Pregnant Bride wore instead of a flower crown, which caused different associations with headgear through my acting in the performance. It led to my large photo object *When Will the Theologians Finally Tell Us Something About Tenderness...* (*Wann werden uns die Theologen endlich etwas von Zärtlichkeit erzählen ...*), where the pacifier crown became Jesus's crown of thorns ... This association was triggered by my acting with the object in the performance.

LN: How did you go about documenting your live performances? Had you planned or conceptualized the recording process beforehand?

RB: All my live performances were photographed, each and every one of them. My most faithful photographer is my husband Reinhold Bertlmann. He was always there; I could really depend on him. He is a good photographer, and he likes taking pictures. I didn't have to explain much to him, because he knew my work inside and out. I have had some bad experiences with other photographers: either the photos

weren't very good and didn't show what I wanted them to show, or they were underexposed, or the photographer was so busy watching what was going on that he or she forgot to take pictures altogether. If it wasn't for my husband, I wouldn't have all that many records of my performances today.

LN: Have these documents changed in significance for you over the years? What is their value to you today? Was it important to you that these pictures showed someone else's perspective on your work?

RB: Though there are many great shots, the value of these photographs is not so much artistic as it is nostalgic: they remind me of how I did what I did back then, and how the performances played out. Beyond that, these photographs have a functional significance: you can exhibit them and use them for catalogues, publications, and so on. In the exhibition *Aktionistinnen* (Female Actionists) at Forum Frohner in Krems back in 2014, I showed one photograph of each performance that someone else took. One of the photographers was Margot Pilz, who took some great pictures of the performance *The Pregnant Bride in the Wheelchair* at the Galerie Modern Art in Vienna. She is an artist herself, and of course I list her as the photographer. The handwriting of the person who took the picture is all over the image. You just have to accept that.

LN: You have described photography as the medium in which you reflect on and document of your performances. Both functions become relevant after the performance. Have you ever used photography before a performance, like sheet music?

RB: At the beginning, you asked me about the *The Pregnant Bride in the Wheelchair*, pointing out that it is mentioned twice on my website. If you don't have all the information, you won't know which of the two is the studio performance and which the live performance. I have, in fact, made studio performances and taken photographs before and after live performances. Beforehand it wasn't always necessary, but sometimes I practiced or tried certain parts at home to see how it would go and what I actually wanted to do. Afterwards, I repeated the performances in the studio to get a little more out of them or to understand something that hadn't been clear or coherent to me initially, something I hadn't been aware of. I circled my performances with photography, also in terms of time.