
Rebecca Horn (1944–2024)

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About the author(s)

is an art historian and curator at the Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien. She was previously a curator at MAK Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna. She has curated numerous exhibitions of contemporary and modern artists, including Rebecca Horn, Joseph Beuys, Anish Kapoor, Jannis Kounellis, Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman and David Hockney, as well as cross-disciplinary projects such as Rebecca Saunders's *Rockaby*. In 2003 she was responsible for the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, together with Kasper König. She is currently working on the most comprehensive retrospective of Marina Abramović's work to date, which will open in Vienna in October 2025.

Cover image:

Rebecca Horn (1944–2024)

by Bettina M. Busse • 23.05.2025

Rebecca Horn **FIG.1**, who died on 6th September 2024, was active as an artist for over five decades. She became a familiar figure to international audiences through major exhibitions in her home country of Germany and abroad, and her work was widely recognised with numerous awards, including the Praemium Imperiale, the Goslar Kaiserring and the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Prize. One of Horn's defining qualities was her ability to move beyond conventional exhibition spaces, working in and with a wide range of environments. In 1986, for example, she exhibited several works alongside Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017) at the Theater am Steinhof, Vienna, which was previously a psychiatric clinic. Among these was *Pendel über Indischgelb* (*Pendulum over Indian Yellow*; 1986), a sculptural installation comprising a long, oscillating rod suspended over a pyramid-heaped pile of yellow pigment. Its upward axial movement evokes Constantin Brâncuși's *Endless Column* (1918), underscoring Horn's preoccupation with expansion, transcending spatial boundaries and the liberation of the psyche.

Horn's works also provide space for explicit political engagement, particularly in sites marked by the trauma of Germany history. Such locations include Münster, where Horn performed *Das gegenläufige Konzert* (*The Contrary Concert*) in 1997, and Weimer, where she presented *Konzert für Buchenwald* (*Concert for Buchenwald*) **FIG.2** in 1999. In both instances, Horn used the charged nature of the site to point towards problematic social developments. As with many of her projects, the works were accompanied by texts of impressive poetic density that articulated her artistic intent. Using a language rich in metaphor, Horn's writings encourage viewers to engage more extensively with her works, whether addressing specific political narratives or broader, universal themes, such as love, desire, proximity, distance, freedom and imprisonment.

From the early 1970s onwards, Horn applied her formal language to a wide variety of media: film, overpainted photography, drawing, gouache, mechanical sculpture, installation, poetry and screenplay. 'It all interlocks', the artist herself stated.¹ 'I always start with an idea, a story, which develops into a text, go from the text into sketches, then a film, and out of that come the sculptures and installations'.² This constant movement between genres is a distinctive characteristic of her practice; as a result, her oeuvre is multi-layered and complex. Poetic fragility, delicacy and playful lightness coexist with violence and destruction – a unique

combination of energy, movement, fluidity, physicality, emotion, abstraction, intensity and politics.

Horn's political consciousness – already evident during her studies at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg in the mid-1960s – was shaped by a number of influences, including the Surrealists, Joseph Beuys (1921–86) and artists associated with Fluxus and Arte Povera. One of the most significant movements of the twentieth century, Surrealism not only sought to rebel against the 'obsolete taste of the bourgeoisie', it also incorporated fundamental, subversive ideas from the fields of philosophy, psychology, ethnology, history and literature. Surrealists sought to unite the seemingly irreconcilable through collage and montage, turning the transgression of disciplinary boundaries into a kind of battle cry, shocking the public in the process. Although Horn clearly engaged with Surrealist conventions in her early works, her focus from the outset was more concerned with reconciliation than exclusion, bringing together opposing forces. For Horn, the goal was not merely to provoke, but to discover ways of achieving change.

Her drawings from the 1960s and 1970s **FIG.3** depict the vulnerability of the female body – often reduced to a torso marked with triangular, trapezoidal or circular forms that forcibly undermine the figures' passivity. An active element, however, soon emerged in the form of prosthetic limb extensions, which could be used to penetrate further into the world – as a counterpoint, so to speak, to the restrictions of the body, especially when its functions are impaired or confined. These early, exploratory sketches signal how central subjective bodily experience was to Horn's practice. Ever since an excruciating stay in a sanatorium for lung problems during her youth, the body – its capacities and limitations, its energy and spatial extension – was a central topic within the framework of her artistic expression.



Fig. 1 Rebecca Horn. (Courtesy the artist's estate and Sean Kelly, New York and Los Angeles; photograph Ute Perrey).

Over time, Horn's human-object symbioses evolved into kinetic objects that no longer required human interaction. These objects' affinity with the mechanical devices of Jean Tinguely (1925–91), Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) and other artists incorporating technological elements in the 1960s and 1970s is unmistakable. Yet what sets Horn's objects apart from their Surrealist predecessors, as well as mid-century machine aesthetics, is their inextricable connection to the human, the irrational and the analogue. Even her early wearable objects – crude extensions for the hand, shoulder or head, fastened with straps or bands – seemed intended less as feats of engineering than as vessels for emotional experience, often activated through performance. Reflecting on her later

devices, the artist stated: 'My machines are not washing machines or cars. They have a human quality and they must change. They get nervous and must stop sometimes. If a machine stops, it doesn't mean it's broken. It's just tired. The tragic or melancholic aspect of machines is very important to me. I don't want them to run forever'.³



Fig. 2 *Konzert für Buchenwald (Concert for Buchenwald)*, by Rebecca Horn. 1987/1997. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist's estate and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin; photograph Attilio Maranzano).

Horn's actions from 1970 to 1973, documented in *Performances I* **FIG.4** and *Performances II* **FIG.5** **FIG.6** as well as in the film cycle *Berlin – Übungen in 9 Stücken (Berlin – Exercises in 9 Pieces)* (1974–75), resonate with the spirit of actions and performances by such artists as Beuys, Nam June Paik (1932–2006) and Asger Jorn

(1914–73), whose interventions had revolutionised the art world a decade earlier. In contrast to these more public and often theatrical gestures, however, Horn's body-based performances took place in more intimate settings with a limited number of participants, guaranteeing the concentration required for such actions.

Horn also frequently employed cryptic, ambiguous actions to create a hallucinatory blend of dream and reality in her narrative films, such as *Der Eintänzer* (*The Gigolo*) FIG.7, *La Ferdinanda: Sonate für eine Medici-Villa* (*La Ferdinanda: Sonata for a Medici Villa*) FIG.8 and *Buster's Bedroom* (1990), the latter of which features such notable actors as Geraldine Chaplin and Donald Sutherland. Each film unfolds within an unmistakably 'Hornian' universe, where relationships are mysterious and ingenious devices take centre stage, becoming protagonists in narratives that range from the mystical to the menacing. Alongside the production of the films, Horn developed notes, movement diagrams and drawings that explore the sculptural and display potential of the props she used. These objects were subsequently presented as autonomous works in solo and group exhibitions.



Fig. 3 *Untitled*, by Rebecca Horn. 1968–69. Pencil and coloured pencil on paper, 32 by 24 cm. (© Rebecca Horn and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; courtesy Sean Kelly, New York and Los Angeles; photograph Adam Reich).

The fact that Horn's film props – stripped of their original narrative frameworks – can be considered as independent, exhibitable objects is highly unusual in art history. This quality owes much to the artist's distinct sensitivity to space. For example, both *Der Eintänzer* and *La Ferdinanda* are set in enclosed interiors – a modest room and a Medici villa, respectively – which function not only as cinematic settings but also as symbolic exhibition spaces for the protagonists' mysterious passions, desires and fantasies. One of the most iconic examples of this transposition from film to sculpture is *Concert for Anarchy* **FIG.9**. In this work, the grand piano from *Buster's Bedroom* is suspended upside down from the ceiling; a mechanism goes off every few minutes, thrusting the keys out of the keyboard. This object has not only been released from its cinematic origins, but also from the institutional confines of the psychiatric clinic where the film was set. As Horn herself put it: 'The piano here is not just any piano, but the same piano that already played a role in *Buster's Bedroom*. Having freed itself from the psychiatric clinic, it now hangs upside down from the ceiling, composing its own music, developing a new tonality'.⁴



Fig. 4 Still from *Performances I*, by Rebecca Horn. 1972. Film, duration 19 minutes. (Courtesy the artist's estate and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin).

Horn's fluid shifts between media – her fusion of imagery, sounds and motion – owe much to her striking urge to reach beyond the visible. Just as her kinetic objects continue to move endlessly, her use of mirrors introduced a sense of infinity into our lived spaces.

On both intimate and monumental scales, she offered a vision of the world as a whole. With each work, she truly 'collected the universe in a pearl'.⁵



Fig. 5 Still from *Performances II*, by Rebecca Horn. 1972. Film, duration 35 minutes. (© Rebecca Horn and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; courtesy Sean Kelly, New York and Los Angeles).

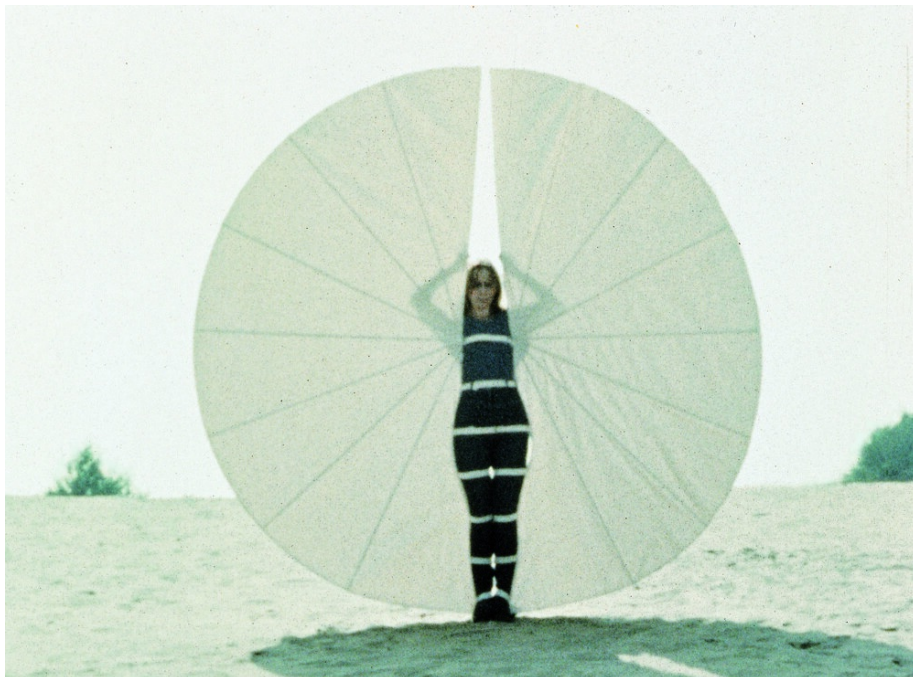


Fig. 6 Still from *Performances II*, by Rebecca Horn. 1972. Film, duration 35 minutes. (© Rebecca Horn and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; courtesy Sean Kelly, New York and Los Angeles).



Fig. 7 Still from *Der Eintänzer* (*The Gigolo*), by Rebecca Horn. 1978. Film, duration 47 minutes. (Courtesy the artist's estate and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin).



Fig. 8 Still from *La Ferdinanda: Sonate für eine Medici-Villa* (*La Ferdinanda: Sonata for a Medici Villa*), by Rebecca Horn. 1981. Film, duration 90 minutes. (Courtesy the artist's estate and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin).

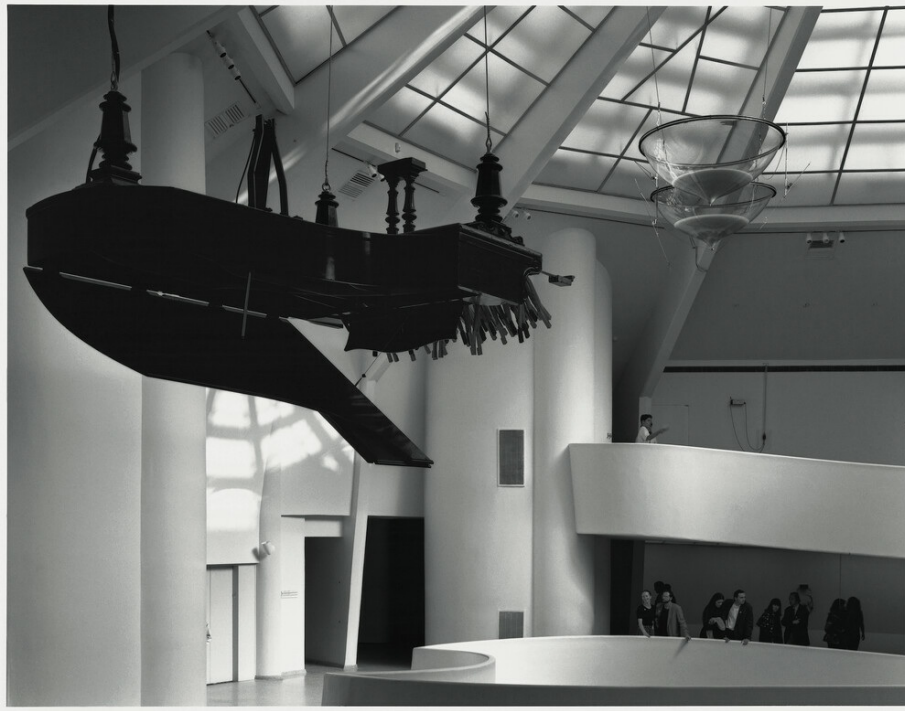


Fig. 9 *Concert for Anarchy*, by Rebecca Horn. 1990. Installation. (© Rebecca Horn and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; courtesy Sean Kelly, New York and Los Angeles; photograph Attilio Maranzano).

Footnotes

- 1** Rebecca Horn, quoted in J. Dornberg: 'Rebecca Horn: the alchemist's tales', *Art News* (December 1991), pp.94–99, at p.99.
- 2** *Ibid.*
- 3** Rebecca Horn, quoted from interview by Germano Celant in R. Horn *et al.*: exh. cat. *Rebecca Horn*, New York (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) and London (Tate Gallery) 1993, p.35.
- 4** Rebecca Horn, quoted from C. Haenlein, ed.: exh. cat. *Rebeccan Horn: The Glance of Infinity*, Hanover (Kestner Gesellschaft) 1997, p.250.
- 5** Rebecca Horn, quoted from A. Zweite, K. Schmidt and D. von Drathen: exh. cat. *Rebecca Horn: Zeichnungen, Skulpturen, Installationen, Filme 1964–2006*, Düsseldorf (K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen) 2004, p.295, translation the author.

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