THE DESIRES OF REBECCA HORN:

ALCHEMY AND THE

MECHANICS

OF INTERPRETATION

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the

University of North Texas in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Douglas Donald Dunlop, B.F.A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1997

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the use of alchemy within the work of Rebecca Horn, to elucidate its presence in her work, and to illuminate its purpose as a personal philosophy and as a creative tool. The use of alchemy within Horn's work occurs as a process of revelation and transformation. Alchemy is revealed as a spiritual philosophy and as an interpretative system through the changes that occur in Horn's oeuvre. Throughout Horn's career, alchemy has developed into an interpretive system, a type of spiritual and cosmic perspective, that allows the artist to study, access, and meld diverse realities (sacred and profane) and diverse social systems (religious and scientific) into a more holistic and spiritually infused reality for herself and society-at-large. The purpose of her work is to help reinvest contemporary life with a spiritual presence by offering a model and a means of bringing the sacred into the profane.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, BIOGRAPHY, STATEMENT OF PROBLEM
AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Biography

Rebecca Horn (b. 1944), a Swiss-German artist, follows the philosophic concept that art is a creative tool to shape life and consciousness. Consciousness shapes itself on a daily basis through all our activities from walking outside and peering up at the sky to the way we interact with other people. Horn has no interest in creating traditional-looking painting and sculpture. Instead, she creates with film, literature, and music, along with more traditional artistic media. Her perspective is that everything in life consists of spiritual energy that we attempt to access through our actions of creation. Acts of creation exist on a continuum from the artistic to the scientific. Above all, Horn uses alchemy as the framework through which she magically perceives and carries out her existence.

Horn conceives life as an artistic act, in which any object can become a conceptual article: a view of art pioneered by Marcel Duchamp, as well as by Joseph Beuys. The use of alchemy within modern art is exemplified by Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Marcel Duchamp, and Rebecca Horn. They question and ultimately dismantle the separation

within Western culture, between art and daily life. These artists are questioning the tenets of art so that the possibilities of how art can function as a creative system for gaining new insight is expanded to include a wider scope of creative activities, activities that enliven and are part of the artistic process, as in the cutting of hair, for Horn, or chess for Duchamp. Part of the process of expanding the realm of art is the constant questioning of the realms of perception (reality or realities) and the materials, mediums, and techniques that constitute what is or is not art. The fascination with expanding notions of art and perception also preoccupies various movements of the early twentieth century from Dadaism and Surrealism, to those that fall under the current rubric of Post Modernism.

One of the influences from Rebecca Horn's childhood and early artistic development was her exposure to alchemical ideas through her reading of Johann Valentin Andreae's *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* [sic] (1616). Later in 1981, Horn created the film *La Ferdinanda* which pays homage to the alchemical text. Horn's early childhood fostered an artistic environment view of life in that she was surrounded by artistic individuals. The type of environment she grew up in is a perfect setting for a young mind to view life in an altered fashion from the beginning. Her father was a fashion designer, a possible influence on her creation of works that act as a type of ritual garment. She had a Romanian governess who taught her to draw at an early age. Initially at school, she was the only child who knew how to draw, and thus she was encouraged to approach life creatively. Also, her uncle was a painter and a powerful figure in her memory. Family

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exists as an important influence on how an individual develops into society for the family inculcates the child with a certain perspective on life. The importance of Horn's childhood in her development is that her personal viewpoint grew from activities of the imagination. Beginning in 1963, she attended the Akademie der Künste in Hamburg. The institute did not promote the traditional study of art. Rather, it pursued art more under the influence of the notions of Joseph Beuys who explored art within the context of social betterment. Art was taught through a myriad of ways from the reading of literature to the attendance of lectures on the nature of artistic practices by artists such as Joseph Beuys. Beuys championed social knowledge through the use of art as a way of studying the connections between science and religion. This expansive view of art allowed for Horn to bring together a number of personal influences in a fluid way, much as alchemy does, thus allowing for multiple perspectives on life to be dealt with simultaneously. Along the lines of studying art within an expanded life context, Horn was influenced by one of her professors, Kai Sudeck, who stressed the importance of reading literature for her artistic development. Sudeck encouraged Horn to read Jean Genet's novel *The Thief's Journal*. It was, according to Sudeck, "all the artistic training she would need." Literature has always had an influence on Horn's work as a substance to ignite the mind. She is attracted to writers whose works are heavily symbolic from Franz Kafka to

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7Biography of Rebecca Horn, (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1994).
Raymound Roussel. At the beginning of her studies, Horn was not creating work in her current vein that did not occur until after her illness.

In 1967, Horn started creating large sculptures out of polyester and fiberglass. While continuing her education in Barcelona, she contracted lung poisoning in 1968 from working with polyester and fiberglass. She was confined to a sanitarium for almost a full year. It was during this time that her parents died. Due to her personal isolation and physical weakness, she made major changes in her creative approach and her use of materials. She used materials that were physically easy to handle, such as feathers and gauze bandages. It was at this point that the influence of alchemy becomes apparent in her art.

Also at this time, performance was of paramount importance to her creative process. Horn focused on the role of the body in communication. She desired to become closer to those around her as a way to draw herself out of isolation. She either presented herself or someone else in actions of disclosure in order to achieve communication. People are often presented clothed in nothing but Horn’s work, as in Feather Instrument (1972) (See Fig. 1.). Disclosure is created by displaying personal rituals, as in Mechanical Body Fan (1973-1974). Feather Instrument is an enactment of voyeurism, where two women open up a feathered window shade to expose a male body. Mechanical Body Fan is the presentation of personal transformation as the artist creates various morphological configurations through the manipulation of a body fan attached to her arms. In order to

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narrow the gap between herself and others, Horn creates works that combine her personal story with cross cultural symbols such as the peacock and universal symbols like the snake, presented in either in actual or symbolic form.9

In her early works and performances, Horn created body extensions that function as machines. She explored herself and her environment by employing materials that are both functional and symbolic, as people do in some capacity with everything they create. Horn used gauze bandages dyed red in her work entitled Arm Extensions (1968). Bandages not only conceal, protect, and confine the body physically, but mentally bandages act as a comforting and focusing device that the individual can huddle within to regain energy.10

Rebecca Horn’s works function as a way of perceiving life imaginatively and spiritually. Her works foster an understanding of our place within a constantly changing world in which everything is alive and has something to teach, if people can learn to see beyond their egos. Within life, reality manifests itself at the crossroads between individual experiences and social knowledge.11

Another early work that illustrates Horn’s stylistic changes is Cornucopia, Seance for Two Breasts (1970). In this work Horn utilized black fabric to construct a body device that connects her breasts to her mouth by two black fabric funnels shaped like cornucopia. The work is about rejuvenation through a symbol of nourishment. Horn’s early works and

10Rebecca Horn, interview by Germano Celant in Rebecca Horn (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1993), 16.
performances were more intimate. Throughout her career she has created works increasingly inter-personal and universal in nature. *Paradise Widow* (1975) and *Unicorn* (1971) are two early works that exemplify Horn’s increasing interest in creating living mythological or fantastic creatures. *Paradise Widow* is a life-size cocoon like structure made of black feathers. The piece exists as a private environment for transformation, that is concurrently comforting and ominous. Horn herself describes the work as both beautiful and monstrous. *Unicorn* is a filmed performance that accentuates beauty, movement, and mythical sensuality. A virtually nude female walks through fields and forests with a long white horn attached to her head by a corset like body construction. *Unicorn* is Horn’s first filmed performance that placed her in Documenta, 1972 in Kassel, an exhibition of international artists.\(^\text{12}\)

Her travels, which have been a perpetual mark of her career, have fostered in Horn the notion of migration and perpetual movement a process that during her schooling took her to England and eventually to the United States. The significance of a location is an element of her work that has grown in importance. In 1971, Horn received a grant from D.A.A.D. (*Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst*) and traveled to St. Martin’s School of Art, London, for further studies. Later, she moved to California in 1974, and taught at the University of California at San Diego and The California Art Institute, Valencia. From 1974 to 1989 Horn’s biography becomes less detailed after 1974 when she became a migratory artist who lived in both the United States (New York and California) and

\(^{12}\)Nancy Spector, "Neither Bachelors Nor Brides: The Hybrid Machines of Rebecca Horn," *Rebecca Horn* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1993), 55-64.
Europe. While Horn still travels to create her work, in 1989 she became a professor of art at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, which is now her primary place of residence.

Currently, she is working between Paris and Berlin on a new film. Rebecca Horn’s most recent works all have a strong alchemical presence with the air of magical occurrences. While the influence of alchemy is evident within Rebecca Horn’s œuvre, it is not something that she regularly or overtly discusses. Rather, she talks in terms that bear a strong alchemical presence. A quote from John Dornberg’s article “The Alchemist’s Tales” illustrates this point: “I never attempt to analyze what I’m doing, I just do it...It’s a learning process, an almost alchemistic way of coming to a realization....”13 Due to this fact, the art of Rebecca Horn needs to be analyzed as a type of poetic reflection that offers periodic glimpses to a larger vision that she is presenting through her creations. Rebecca Horn uses alchemy in her art as a tool to explore her position in the world around her.

Alchemy has deeply inspired Horn throughout her career. In her work entitled *The Hydra Forest, Performing Oscar Wilde* (1988), which won a prize at the Carnegie International, Horn used copper and mercury in a context that invokes their alchemical associations. Alchemically copper is one of the metallurgical transformations below the level of enlightenment, symbolized by gold; a symbol of the sun. Mercury is symbolic of change, mutation, and dissolution.14

The royal art of alchemy is a form of art in that its purpose is to create personal identity through the use of materials, ritual actions, and the imagination.15 Creatively

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15 Ibid., 23-33.
experimenting with the contours of alchemy is one way of discovering the essential quality of something by analyzing and meditating on it through the use of symbols, rituals, and experimentation.  

Alchemy is about the attainment of higher levels of spiritual knowledge through the study of the principles of life obtained through the chemical and spiritual analyses of various plants and minerals. This includes the study of various herbs, such as heliotrope, and elemental materials, such as mercury and sulfur. Alchemy also fosters personal and spiritual growth through the study of alchemical texts, through meditation upon alchemical tenets and concepts such as those from the *Emerald Tablet* mythically attributed to Hermes Tristegius: “What is below is like what is above, and what is above is like what is below, to accomplish the wonders of the one thing (*Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius, et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius, ad perpetranda miracula rei unus.*)”

These concepts and tenets are illustrated and embodied within alchemical symbols, allegories, and processes as exemplified in the emblem of the lion eating the sun as a symbol of the perpetual and cyclical nature of personal growth that takes the individual from chaotic darkness to personal illumination brought on by the sun as a cosmic force. This knowledge is gained in practice through mirroring the processes of transformation within the universe. The process of condensation, for example, is an activity that not

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16 Ibid., 7-33.
only magically pulls vapor from the air, but also symbolizes the connection of air (the heavens) and the chemical mass of essential materials (earth). From these materials, metaphorically speaking, a stripped down essence of self (purified spirit) is extracted.\textsuperscript{21}

According to alchemy, the process of condensation brings together seemingly separate materials, symbolizing the conjunction of the sacred and the profane. Alchemy melts away the barriers between self and a larger spiritual presence that, in some capacity, exists within all of us.\textsuperscript{22}

One example in Rebecca Horn’s work is \textit{The Bath of the Reflected Dew Drops} (1985). The bath is a hexagonal device constructed of mirrors, metal, and glass positioned within a field in a circular space. The piece is a bath that distills water from the air trapped within the contained bath. It is also a metaphorical process that bridges two realms of existence, the sacred and the profane.

Alchemical processes and materials are employed by Horn to express her “artistic” concerns dealing with the various ways of manifesting the spiritual energies deep within all of us, with the word \textit{artistic} in quotes to designate Horn’s dislike of the term’s confining nature. These energies are important in the creation of our spiritual selves; part of their function is to affirm and reaffirm our connection to the world. Within this artistic concern, Horn follows the philosophic concept that art is a creative tool to shape life and consciousness. This point is also exemplified in a quote from an catalog of an international festival in 1989, in which Horn’s work appeared: “Yet common to all [of

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Horn's works] is their initial inspiration in an alchemical tale written by Johann Andreae in 1616 in which the birth, growth and ultimate sacrifice of a bird constitutes part of a symbolic quest for enlightenment and self-knowledge.\textsuperscript{123} Consciousness is largely shaped by how we perceive ourselves existing in relation to the universe. This self-perception occurs on a daily basis through all our activities, from walking outside and peering up at the sky to the way we interact with other people. Within Western societies, self-perception and interconnectedness to the surrounding world are dictated by scientific (materialistic) thinking and secular living, in which there exist clear demarcations between life's activities.\textsuperscript{24}

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the use of alchemy within the work of Rebecca Horn to elucidate its presence in her work and to illuminate its purpose as a personal philosophy and a creative tool.

Methodology

The gathering of primary data used in my analysis of Rebecca Horn's oeuvre included the viewing of two of her works: \textit{Pendulum} and \textit{The Hydra Forest, Performing Oscar Wilde}. \textit{Pendulum} was viewed at the Site Santa Fe exhibit during October 1995. \textit{The Hydra Forest, Performing Oscar Wilde} was viewed during March of 1996 and is on exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In addition to viewing these two

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Lynne Cooke, "Rebecca Horn: Missing Full Moon," \textit{Flash Art} 26, (November/December 1993) reprint from the Bath International Festival catalog, 1989.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Susanne K. Langer, \textit{Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 84-102.
\end{itemize}
works, contact was made with her main gallery in New York City, the Marion Goodman Gallery. I have also contacted several galleries and institutions in both the United States and Europe such as the Guggenheim Museum, New York and the Serpentine Gallery, London. The Guggenheim Museum catalogue Rebecca Horn from Horn's retrospective exhibition in 1993 was one of the main sources of information used. I have read filmbooks containing scenes and dialogue from Horn's films, such as Buster's Bedroom (1990). Horn's own writings also are a rich source of information including La Lune Rebelle (1993) a book with reproductions of her installations and drawings along with poetic writings. Most important, I read Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz by Johann Valetin Andreae an alchemical text that has considerable influence on Horn's work.

Secondary data was obtained from reading essays, reviews, newspaper articles, exhibition catalogues and brochures. I have utilized biographies and bibliographies as well as other information contributed by museums and galleries. Criticism of her work was analyzed along with a video pertaining to her work. Other materials and works by various artists and academics have been read and analyzed that exist in the same vein as Horn's work. Books on artists who have influenced her were read, including Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys. I have also read authors who have influenced Horn from Franz Kafka to Jean Genet. Books on the occult in art, on performance art, symbolism, art theory, and theories of communication were read along with books on Western philosophical development along with periodicals and books on psychology and human sexuality. Some of the secondary sources on the occult and alchemy that were utilized are Titus
Burkhardt's *Alchemy*, Carl Gustav Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* and *Symbols of Transformation*, Delmar Bryant's *The Art of Alchemy*, and Stephen Edred Flowers' *Hermetic Magic*. Works such as these have been infinitely helpful in the exploration of the type of mindset that is fostered within alchemy, by reading such texts better insight was gained into the type of symbols that are an integral part of Horn's work. The process of such an investigation helped me to formulate and explore my own thesis on how alchemy functions in Horn's work. Valuable insight was gained from all these sources in the pursuit of understanding not only the art of Rebecca Horn but all art that follows similar lines of thought, all these elements were necessary in the study of an artist who creates a holistic vision.
Since Rebecca Horn has been working for almost thirty years, it is surprising the most comprehensive review of her work is the Guggenheim catalogue from her 1993 retrospective exhibition. While being addressed in the Guggenheim catalogue and various other articles, her use of alchemy never receives thorough analysis as a primary point of reference through which Horn creates her work. Alchemy receives minimal analytic attention as a creative tool and spiritual-philosophical system that functions in a parallel fashion to the concepts, aims, and formal construction of Horn’s work. Although several essays (those by Holland Cotter, Bice Curiger, and Dena Shottenkirk) examine alchemy, chemical connotations, or the occult as one of the symbolic elements of her work, much of the literature on Horn makes little or no mention of alchemy as a creative tool.

Reviewers, whether they are aware of it or not, often make reference to Horn’s work in ways that hint at the influence of alchemy. The article “Rebecca Horn: Delicacy and Danger” (1993) by Holland Cotter, for Art in America, is a fine example of a review that approaches alchemy in a sporadic and implied fashion: “The entire museum, it is implied, had become a huge arterial system coursing with a mysterious chemical concoction.”

Bice Curiger’s essay “Gentle Transference,” written for Parkett (1987),

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also implies that an alchemical type process occurs within Horn’s films: “The persistence and immutability of the tension stems from the fact that one finds oneself at the center of events—until the repetition begins to reproduce itself as an image reflected ad infinitum in self-reflecting mirrors.”

Another essay that approaches Horn’s work in a similar way is “The Bird in Rebecca Horn’s Work,” also from Parkett (1987), by Demosthenes Davvetas:

Talking about the work of Rebecca Horn means taking art not as a game restricted to verbal orgasm or optical pleasure, but rather as something which, through language or the eye, touches on “another” reality, an ecstasy, a vision, a distant collective memory, something less segmental and more spherical, something which folds in on itself like a ritual.

The direct mention of alchemy appears in the title of John Domberg’s article entitled “Rebecca Horn: The Alchemist’s Tales,” found in Art News (1991). In the essay however, the direct mention of alchemy only occurs once, and that is in a quote from Horn, “I never attempt to analyze what I’m doing, I just do it,...It’s a learning process, an almost alchemistic way of coming to a realization. I leave it to the critics and reviewers to interpret.”

Several reviews of Horn’s exhibitions mention alchemy in passing: Dena Shottenkirk, in her review for Arts and Antiques, wrote “Horn forms her own connections to alchemy and magic, the making of something extraordinary out of base (or at least overlooked) materials.” On the other hand, Dena Shottenkirk’s review takes a

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shortsighted view of the alchemical process. Shottenkirk’s statement “the making of something extraordinary” is not the true aim of alchemy. The changes must exist in a spiritual context and not just any extraordinary change of the material is alchemical. The true aim of alchemy is not the creation of something extraordinary, but rather is the manifestation of the spiritual within the physical.30 Another review by Brooks Adams, found in Art in America, states: “Amerika seemed to offer a high-flying allegory of immigration and alienation, an exalted sense of spiritual poverty and artistic alchemy.”31 In another review, Colin Gardner of Artforum wrote: “Although it was possible to read the installation independently of the film—the sculptures’ references to reptilian metamorphosis, alchemy, and mechanical conjunction/dislocation are familiar themes in Horn’s oeuvre...”32 The above mentioned examples by Shottenkirk, Dornberg, and Gardner are typical in their approach towards Horn’s work. Writings on Horn’s oeuvre are usually descriptive phrases strung together that only describe her work in an aesthetic and formal fashion, that only scratches the surface of its complexity.

In an essay from Parkett entitled “Vague Musings About the Work of Rebecca Horn” (1994), Gilbert Lascault used the somewhat typical approach of reviewers in that the influence of alchemy was only marginally considered. A citation from his essay makes this point clear: “Snakes, black mirrors, dark birds, the presence of four elements, eggs, mercury...There are elective affinities between Rebecca Horn’s universe and alchemical

While the overall mention of alchemy is relatively typical of other essayists' approaches to Horn's work, Lascault does a good job describing other influences in Horn's work that have parallel affinities to alchemy:

Around the machineries, the stratagems that Rebecca Horn so rigorously assembles, and organizes, you may choose to let your imagination wander into vague musings, uncertain wanderings, strayings. You may attempt to broach the precise through the indistinct, the exact through the approximate, the rigorous through the imprecise, the clear through the blurry.\(^3^4\)

There still exists a tendency to analyze the spiritual and occult tendencies in Horn's œuvre as just an expansion of predominant social perceptions as something that is to be explained primarily through framework of mechanistic thinking. The reason is that it makes it easier to discuss such topics without breaking with the modes of explanation that still have precedent in much of the analysis of occult subjects within Horn's work. The materialistic approaches to Horn's work are an excellent example of this phenomenon.

Horn's work is often analyzed under the tenets of artistic and literary devices; an example of this approach is an essay from an issue of Parkett entitled "A Draft in Kafka's Bedroom - Oppressive Memories: The Large Rebecca Horn Exhibition in Berlin" by Werner Spies:

For as private as many of the elements may initially seem, closer scrutiny reveals a key point of reference in Surrealism, and in readings that range from De Sade, Mirabeau and Roussel to Jarry, Kafka and Beckett... This high degree of assimilation which embeds her work in what has gone before distinguishes radically from the arbitrary employment of materials and ideas otherwise found in the field of action art and magical objects. In place of the myth of the tabula rasa and spontaneity, Horn sets a system of interrelationships.\(^3^5\)

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\(^3^3\) Gilbert Lascault, "Vague Musings About the Work of Rebecca Horn," Parkett 40/41, (June 1994): 105.
\(^3^4\) Ibid., 104.
While Spies' essay is a good analysis of the influences in Horn's work, it fails to place her work in its larger alchemical and spiritual context.

Daniel Soutif's essay entitled "Trickery and Display," while also ignoring the spiritual, offers a good insight into the machine in Horn's work as compared to the usual utilitarian function of machines:

...as Georges Canguilhem has admirably demonstrated—mechanism explains life only with the proviso that life first of all produced machines. This is a vicious circle that no automatism will ever break...Certainly in order to offer a mechanical explanation of life, a machine have acquired its own autonomy, that is, it must have literally become an automaton.36

Another writing that verifies that this materialistic approach to Horn's work is a regular occurrence is Christoph Schenker's review from Flash Art (1988) on an exhibit at the Elisabeth Kaufmann gallery, Zurich. A quotation from the article clarifies this point: "It seems to me that the work of Rebecca Horn is a masterful rite of initiation into culture with her machines and action sculptures as possible images of culture."37

Germano Celant in his essay, "The Divine Comedy of Rebecca Horn," and in his interview in the Guggenheim catalogue, has achieved one of the most thorough investigations of the importance of alchemy in Horn's work. He states that Horn places herself within the tradition of the Hermetic and the Rosicrucians, and that alchemy has influenced Horn's iconography. The point of contention within my own thesis is that alchemy serves a deeper function as a personal philosophy for Horn, which is beyond what Celant and most other writers mention. The difference between my thesis and the writings

of Celant and most others is that it explores and analyzes alchemy as a living philosophy which Horn employs for herself. Horn’s use of alchemy is not just an esoteric example of mystical transformation, as often stated in reviews.\(^{38}\)

Another essay in the Guggenheim catalogue by Nancy Spector, is entitled “Neither Bachelors nor Brides: The Hybrid Machines of Rebecca Horn.” While not as thorough as the essay by Celant in its analysis of alchemy, it does offer a more literal connection:

While alchemy has historically been dismissed as a hermetic cult driven by the desire to produce gold out of mundane substances, can better be defined as a noninstitutionalized medieval religion of self-revelation. According to alchemy’s symbolic language, the spiritual dimension is attained through a ritualistic process involving the combination of certain chemical substances representative of opposing natural forces-fire and water, earth and air, man and woman.\(^{39}\)

An essay that meets and surpasses Celant’s treatment of alchemy in Horn’s work is “Rebecca Horn: Missing Full Moon” (1993) by Lynne Cooke, found in *Flash Art*. Cooke writes that Horn’s employment of alchemy expresses “the essential themes of an alchemical vision of life through metaphors and allegories that quote, but do not illustrate, the dilemmas of its traditional iconography and subjects, she invents new configurations and forms.” In her essay, Cooke defines alchemy as a “reference system promoting oneness.” Another essay that falls under the category of Cooke’s with its mentioning and explanation of alchemy in Horn’s work is a catalog entry from the Bath International Festival catalog. Both essays come the closest to expressing the ideals of this thesis. The two essays are the most complete overall approach I have seen of Horn’s work. A


shortcoming of both essays is that they do not fully define the scope that alchemy covers, the complexities of alchemy's manifestations, its comprehensive implications, nor its full development in Horn's work.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{40}Lynne Cooke, "Rebecca Horn: Missing Full Moon," \textit{Flash Art} 26, (November/December 1993): 74-77.
CHAPTER III

THE CONTEXT OF ALCHEMY

Alchemy fosters the realization of a higher state of self perception and actualization as a spiritual being. This transformation is brought about by the unearthing of one’s deep-seated spiritual capacity. This spiritual capacity exists as a divine force or entity that extends past any one individual and constitutes the universe as a whole.\textsuperscript{41} The purpose of alchemical workings is to gain knowledge to the divine workings of the universe and therefore become more entwined in these workings.\textsuperscript{42} Alchemy is a mystical and magical practice that deals with manipulation of metals inspired by meditation on the complex organization and spiritual nature of the universe. And through the alchemical manipulation of materials and the exposure to alchemical tenets, individuals are able to harness more fully their spiritual capacity and gain in divine knowledge. The purpose of alchemy is to gain knowledge for the spiritual growth of the self. Manipulation of materials never occurs for purely materialistic ends.\textsuperscript{43} The historical context that led to the development of Hermetic thought, from which alchemy emerged, needs to be known in general terms, at least so that the conceptual framework of alchemy that was and still is adopted by artists from Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein to Rebecca Horn can be understood.

Alchemy and Hermetic thought, even though Hermes is the god of magical arts, is not wholly of Greek origin. In many accounts, alchemy developed during Hellenic Greek times on Egyptian soil in centers like Alexandria. Rather, alchemy and Hermetic thought contain elements from Egyptian magic and elements possibly from ancient Egyptian religion in general to that of Greek philosophy as well as from other ancient philosophies such as those of the present day Arab nations. Alchemy was initially part of magical cults that required some sort of initiation within a small group or on a one-to-one basis.  

Alchemy is the movement to a state of higher spiritual being through the basic stages of transformation exemplified in the change in the appearance of essential materials. While there exist a myriad of ways to achieve the desired end of spiritual knowledge through the attainment of the Philosopher’s Stone, there are four basic stages in the alchemical process. Within the work of Rebecca Horn, the process of alchemical transformation is subsumed into a number of her works either in a direct fashion or in an abstracted one. The use of alchemically inspired images and creative perspectives, along with the incorporation of more out right alchemical processes, functions in the realization and manifestation of spiritual forces that Rebecca Horn condenses under the term energies.

The four stages of the alchemial process are known as the blackening, the whitening, the yellowing, and the reddening. The primary explanation of these four stages goes something like this:

The nigredo or blackness is the initial state, either present from the beginning as a

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quality of the prima materia, the chaos or massa confusa, or else produced by the separation (soluto, sepetatio, diviso, putrefactio) of the elements. If the separated condition is assumed at the start, as sometimes happens, then a union of opposites is performed under the likeness of a union of male and female (called the coniugium, matrimonium, coniunctio, coitus), followed by the death of the product of the union (motificatio, calcinatio, putrefactio) and a corresponding nigredo. From this the washing (abluvio, baptismum) either leads direct to the whitening (albedo), or else the soul (anima) released at the “death” is reunited with the body and brings about its resurrection, or again the “many colours” (omnes colores), or “peacock’s tail” (cauda pavonis), lead to the one white colour that contains all colours. At this point the first main goal of the process is reached, namely the albedo, tintura alba, terra alba foliata, lapis albus, etc., highly prized by many alchemists as if it were the ultimate goal. It is the silver or moon condition, which still has to be raised to the sun condition. The albedo is, so to speak, the sunrise. The transition to the rubedo is formed by the citrinitas... The rubedo then follows direct from the albedo as the result of raising the heat of the fire to its highest intensity. The red and the white are King and Queen, who may also celebrate their “chymical wedding” at this stage. 46

Some of the basic symbols and color associations that appear in the above processes of transformation find resonance through Horn’s work as a type of personalized mystical language. The four main stages of the alchemical process demarcate the level of growth that occurs through the loss of self (personal chaos) that occurs when unessential materials are stripped away during the stages of transformation. The four stages spell out the changes that must occur so as to unleash the golden (sun) energy that exists within all of us. To enable this golden state to occur we must become attuned to the workings of ourselves and the world around us in a spiritual way. 47 Alchemy is the predecessor to modern chemistry, and it is to this pre-stage of scientific thought that many contemporary users of alchemy go so as to push Western thought back in the direction where the sacred

and the profane, science and religion, can once again inform one another.\textsuperscript{48} It is within the vein of exploring the boundaries of religion and science that the development of psychoanalysis was born at the end of the nineteenth century with Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Jung even explored alchemy in the creation of his notions of the collective unconscious: “A symbolism as rich as that of alchemy invariably owes its existence to some adequate cause, never to mere whim or play of fancy. At the very least it is the expression of an essential part of the psyche. This psyche, however, was unknown, for it is rightly called the unconscious.”\textsuperscript{49}

In contemporary settings as in current artistic practices, alchemy is often employed in a symbolic and not necessarily practical fashion. Within a contemporary context, alchemy is a tool that functions in various ways as a general expression of a quest to explore the parameters of Western existence, but not necessarily as a total way of life. Also, it is used as a way of exploring the reality of self and the possibility that other models of reality exist. The exploration of self-creation and autonomy was something of concern for artists of the late nineteenth century on in the realm of literature as well as the plastic arts. This group ranged from the fantastic literary realities of Alfred Jarry to the Symbolist painters and writers. While not all those who were engaging in the practice of art in the transformative stages of the nineteenth-century onward did so in the form of occult practices, attitudes that paralleled occult thought were definitely afloat.\textsuperscript{50} The total


general influence between the occult and artistic tenets of this period is open to further research. Alchemy within contemporary existence is one way of perceiving and living among the myriad ways of thought within twentieth-century life.

Searching for a higher self or reality was assumed later by twentieth-century artists, ranging from Duchamp to Joseph Beuys, whose art searched for the connections between the sacred and the profane. Marcel Duchamp was possibly attracted to the workings of alchemy for his construction of four-dimensional space, or in the least, it seems that he was attracted to notions of the nature of the cosmos such as alchemy and this influenced his work. Duchamp may have employed alchemy in the creation of his own system of physics steeped in chance and relativity. The jury is still out on the full extent of Duchamp's use of the occult. The following quote from John Goldberg exemplifies the nature of the debate: "If alchemy interested Duchamp it was because he saw in it a kind of cosmic chess, a system of speculative thought, half science, half philosophy, in which ideas were constantly being formulated which by definition could never reach a positive of definite conclusion."51 Duchamp broke down the walls of Western artistic perception for this purpose. His quest was largely subsumed in his extensive creation The Large Glass. Joseph Beuys assumed alchemical ideas to explore the inherent properties of materials from fat to wax. These materials exhibited the basic tenets of sculpture that dealt with the creation of organized (crystallized substances) that had varying degrees of malleability, depending on the amount of heat applied.52 The movement from order to chaos for Beuys

51 "Rebecca Horn: Missing Full Moon (Bath: Bath International Festival Catalog, 1989), 12-13.
exemplified the basic conceptual connection between religion and science, between ordered and intuitive thought. Yves Klein is another contemporary artist involved in alchemy who employed the elements of fire and water in the creation of his paintings. He depended on the elemental forces to finish the creation of his work; he allowed them to transform themselves into their final stages. Rebecca Horn assimilates several practices from all these artists and subsumes them in her total act of artistic creation. Horn's use of alchemy occurs in a process of revelation throughout her work as she discovers and explores the connections between the various spheres of contemporary reality. The use of alchemy in Horn's early work is at first not overt but rather it presents itself through the language Horn employs when talking about her early work. Alchemy is also expressed in the anthropocentric type of work that she creates starting in the late sixties after her illness. The nature and function of these works are explored in the next chapter in which Horn subconsciously starts to draw on alchemical ideas.

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CHAPTER IV

REBECCA HORN’S PLACEMENT WITHIN PERFORMANCE ART AND THE
CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ART

WITH AN ANALYSIS OF *ARM EXTENSIONS* AND
*CORNUCOPIA, SEANCE FOR TWO BREASTS*

AS TOOLS OF SENSORY EXPANSION

Our bodies are a primary place for the construction of our personal identities. Within alchemy, the human body is a primary symbol that finds expression in the alchemical vessel which has anthropomorphic connotations, the inner sanctums of the self as a place of inner contemplation. The alchemical vessel is a place in which the alchemical processes of transformation transpire, both through the actual physical process of chemical mixing and also within the interior of the self which the alchemic vessel symbolizes. The vessel symbolically exists as a type of womb or place of change and creation on both a personal and cosmic level. It also exists as a metaphor for our interior or reflective self.\(^5^5\) How we perceive and treat our bodies speaks volumes about ourselves and the society within which we exist. Not much else has the tendency of placing one’s focus on the body.

Rebecca Horn had such an experience in 1967. Due to her bout with an illness of the lungs brought on by the inhalation of fiberglass and other dangerous fibrous materials, she was placed in a hospital. During the experience, she was faced with the loneliness of her own body as disconnected from the world around her. She felt disconnected because that is what was accentuated and symbolized by the nature of the hospital in which she spent much time alone, confined to her bed and presented with medication, isolated from the world at large. As a personal symbol and as a product of a social reality, the hospital and all its trappings exist as a way of treating the body as separate from the mind as a center of creative healing. Also within the hospital, our daily existence is stripped away from us. Adding to this sense is the fact that Horn also lost her father around this time. She existed in such an environment for over a year. During this time, she started creating works that transcended her situation. She wanted to communicate her total personal visions through creative acts. The hospital is a reflection of Western technology and is a social reality within which Horn existed, so it became part of who she was, yet she expressed the desire to move past this confinement. One way of achieving this is to incorporate the mechanics of your surroundings and then to alter them to fit your needs. In other words, Horn was transforming or expanding the symbolic content of the hospital. Growth occurs through the incorporation and expansion of one’s environment. New growth also occurs by the inversion of symbols that are already present since the mind is already acclimated with that symbol. To move to new grounds, the mind needs to perceive new associations. It is in the realm of new associations alchemy begins to present itself as a way to reorder the current reality without stepping completely outside the
current system. Alchemy helps to create new avenues and contexts of expression for the present situation that opens up Horn’s life, and consequently through her work, ours as well. Within Western culture, alchemy can expand the mind to other ways of perceiving and realizing life. Alchemy is a multifaceted system that incorporates the various components of Western thought from the pre-scientific in its proto-chemistry aspects as well as various Greek philosophical systems along with other mystical systems. The nature of alchemy allows for the amalgamation, exploration, and expansion of various seemingly closed systems such as Western materialism as encapsulated in scientific thinking or the utilitarian nature of Western medicine.

One of the fundamental aspects of alchemy is the sense of connection it fosters between the alchemist and the surrounding universe. In Western thought, the connection between self and universe and conversely between mind (spirit) and body has been severed. Due to the type of mechanical and materialistic thinking in the history of Western society and thought, the process of healing and maintaining the body is not an activity in which personal states of emotion and spiritual comfort are seen as integral in this process. Horn experienced the kind of separation between spirit and body when she was being treated for her lung illness. Instead of existing within an environment that kept her away from the concerns of daily life so she could heal, the sanitarium was a part of her feeling of isolation. Her illness defined her body as the central concern of her work,
which at the stage after her illness was about isolation and the desired movement from this isolation. This refocusing on the self recontextualized the nature of her interaction and perception of others. There exists a stillness to Horn’s work, as if something is brewing beneath the surface that speaks of a sense of loneliness that is being overcome by the total exposure of self that occurs in some of her earlier performances. *Arm Extensions* (1968), one of Horn's earliest works created after her illness, expressed this stillness that speaks of inward contemplation.39

*Arm Extensions* is a performance that focuses on expanding beyond the physical limitations of the body and mind that has both personal and social parameters (See Fig. 2.). *Arm Extensions* turns Horn’s body into a sculpture. In this performance, her arms and body are wrapped with red bandages that reflect the type of materials that did surround her in the hospital. Bandages are the type of lightweight materials that she started to work with due to her illness. The red bandages are wrapped tightly around her arms several inches thick—from the arms, the bandages, starting at the lower torso, continue to the ankles. The bandages strap the legs together creating a sense of sculptural presence that transforms Horn’s own physical presence. The wrappings extend her arms to the floor creating a strong sense of grounding through the rooted appearance of the extensions that have the diameter of a small tree. Connotations of sexual bondage and mummification are also present. The bandages also become a type of prison that are different from the artificial constraints of the hospital. They are a prison that begs the

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question—what are the confines of human existence? This is a prison that is only completely escapable through death and partially through acts of fantastic processes, such as ritual, myth, and erotic acts.

Alchemical parallels exist in the work in that Horn uses her time of physical confinement, her dark time, to realize a new perception and spiritual transformation of her body. Alchemically speaking Horn turned the chaotic situation of the hospital from a time of indeterminacy into one of potentiality and a growth in self and knowledge that pushed her to be more interactive with her environment. The anthropocentric nature of alchemy, in which the human body is a central point of the cosmology, is something that took place with Horn in her time of illness. With this focus came the focus on the basic ideas of daily life in a context that places the mundane within the level of the spiritual and therefore reduces the nature of isolation between individuals in society by giving importance to the basic forces of life such as the connection to our own bodies and the ground we stand upon.

Another alchemical element inherent in *Arm Extensions* is that the stage is being set for further transformations to take place within the confines of the body as a symbolic space, an alchemic vessel in which diverse materials intermingle, in which one element changes the other and vice-versa. The alchemic vessel has parallel connections to the human body, which is the central place for total transformations that take place in alchemy. The processes and interactions of the body are a central motif throughout Horn’s work. The body acts as an intermediary force between the various realities of human existence. The body is the central place in Horn’s work, whether it is always
physically present or not, in which traditional modes of thinking and interacting within Western society are questioned and expanded.

By presenting herself in prosthetics within a gallery setting, stripped bare except for the bandages, Horn situated herself outside the typical setting of a bandaged body and expressed her need to move beyond those confines. She wants to reemerge her mind and body into the world to reestablish connection. Since Horn’s ego emerged from the social and cultural environment of Germany and Europe, a dissolution of her ego occurred through her confrontation with the medical system. The medical practices of a society are a reflection of that society’s view of life. Giuliana Bruno’s essay “Interiors: Anatomies of the Bride Machine” substantiates the importance of medicine and body image: “The medical motif is deeply inscribed in Horn’s aesthetic practice, for the medical terrain is, precisely, the domain of the body. Medicine has been central to the imaging of the body, in tandem with the visual arts.”

*Arm Extensions* explores the participation of artist and audience in its level of personal exposure. *Arm Extensions* expresses the sensual act of body disclosure. *Cornucopia, Seance for Two Breasts* (1970) carries this level of interaction a step further.

*Cornucopia* enacts a similar process to *Arm Extensions* in its exploration of body. In *Cornucopia*, both of Rebecca Horn’s breasts are covered in black fabric in such a way as to create separate cornucopias over her breasts; the separate cornucopias or horns are reconnected at the mouth (See Fig. 3.). The two cornucopias are at once reflective of...
diseased lungs and mental expansion.\textsuperscript{61} This expansion leads back to oneness as the energy from the breasts, symbolic of life, is pooled from darkness into the light of day and back into the body as a substance changed from illness to new life. The breast energy rejuvenates the darkened lungs. This sense of redemption through the feminine presence of breasts has an alchemical and spiritual significance shown in the following passages from \textit{Psychology and Alchemy} and \textit{The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets}:

"Alchemists sought the divine female power Sapientia, or Sophia (Wisdom), the Gnostics' Great Mother....Aphrodite rising from the sea, spouting streams of milk and blood from her breasts."\textsuperscript{62} "The sea of renewal rising from the virgin’s milk....the life giving power of the unconscious."\textsuperscript{63} The difference between \textit{Arm Extensions} and \textit{Cornucopia, Seance for Two Breasts} is that the body as an artistic metaphor is being more fully explored. A more completed notion of ritual occurs with the exploration of the body as having creative and spiritual energies; an area of contemplation established in \textit{Arm Extensions}. Within \textit{Arm Extensions}, the body became a place of interaction between artist and audience and existed as a physical space of interaction. \textit{Cornucopia} expands on this notion through its focus on a highly evocative and symbolically rich area of the female anatomy, that being the breasts. This focus places more concentrated emphasis on the creative power of female body through the highly eroticized, sexualized, and nurturing symbol of the breast.

The performance of \textit{Cornucopia} is more personal and involves more intimate participation

\textsuperscript{61Nancy Spector, "Neither Bachelors nor Brides: The Hybrid Machines of Rebecca Horn," Rebecca Horn (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1993), 59.}
\textsuperscript{62Barbar C. Walker, Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publisher, 1983), 19.}
\textsuperscript{63Carl Gustav Jung, Psychology and Alchemy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 409.}
with the level of ritualistic exposure of the body as a symbolic vessel, which is established in Arm Extensions. Cornucopia, Seance for Two Breasts takes this a step farther in the expression of body parts and the nature of confinement as a type of mask, a symbolic metaphor unto itself. Cornucopia functions as a more complete type of ritual than Arm Extensions through its sensuality and sense of self creation that is expressed through gaining nourishment from her own breasts. Horn tapped into her own personal strengths, yet first she had to move beyond herself through the cornucopias so as to view herself in a new context. And from that new ground of vision, she could then envision herself as something more through a process of self-procreation, or giving birth to a new self. Cornucopia, Seance for Two Breasts and Arm Extensions are two examples of Horn’s earliest performances in which she is sometimes the main character. To understand better why performance was a perfect vehicle for Horn to express herself creatively, it becomes necessary to examine in a general way the historical context of performance art. Within the parameters of performance art, there have existed many overt and not so overt parallels and influences from occult thought, including alchemy. Occult thought fit well into, and even influenced, the making of a creative personality that flew in the face of contemporary convictions and placed the artist as a type of god-like creative force. Artistic force could transcend reality as it was perceived and create a new vision of life. Artists from the nineteenth century onward were caught in the throes of cultural changes due to industrialization and advancements in science and psychology. These discoveries helped to fuel the artistic mind to the possibility of unseen realms of human conception.
In order for new insights and creative ideas to take place, older traditions and standards need to be questioned and in some ways dismantled. Within the context of art created during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the break from traditional artistic and mainstream cultural ideas has entailed a good deal of activity within studies of the occult. While not all artists engaged in these types of practices, there was a general artistic movement away from art as a bourgeois commodity. Artists were becoming increasingly interested in reshaping their role in society, and the type of interaction that occurred between themselves and the public and the occult was something that questioned the very assumptions of a materialistic bourgeois society. Those artists, from the Nabis to the Theosophists, who embraced occult ideas, had a good deal to gain from expanding the social concepts of art. In order for any of these artistic traditions to have any impact on the basic connections between artist and audience (society), a drastic change had to occur concerning the role of art within society. At the core of such a movement, during the very last of the nineteenth-century and well into the twentieth-century, is performance art. Performance art was a phenomena that occurred within most artistic movements of the early twentieth century. Performance art is one of the basic tools for disrupting the traditional ties between artists and society that is so necessary for the advancement of notions like the occult, including alchemy, within art and society at large.

The artistic tradition within which Horn’s work can be placed has its foundations with the art and times of Marcel Duchamp and the Surrealists. This artistic heritage, as far as the nature of performance and the basic concepts of rebelling against established orders that separate art and society, in part, had an important beginning with Alfred Jarry at the
end of the nineteenth century in Paris. He was a late nineteenth-century French writer of prose, poetry, and plays, who is most noted for the play *Ubu Roi*. Jarry was involved with radical new literary and theatrical ideas that influenced the Italian Futurist Filippo Marinetti. Jarry's ideas of free verse, open-ended and multifaceted ideas, exist not only in Futurism but also in Dadaism. The importance of Jarry's ideas on artists from the Futurists to Duchamp and the Dadaists and eventually to Horn is that of the creation of connections between words, images, objects, and ideas that are not normally placed within the same context. In practice, Jarry's theories create a conceptual space for the playing off of ideas on one another so as to create an opening for change. The opening up of ideas allows for new ideas to find expression within the social context at hand. Jarry's ideas are influential on the beginnings of Futurism, which was the first modern artistic movement to embrace performance as a basis for their artistic project of awakening the public. Within the context of Horn's work, the influence of Jarry and Duchamp has an impact on Horn's emloyment of alchemical principles. This influence occurs within Horn’s work in how she creates a state of conflict in her work so as to create a state of interaction between alchemy and the activities of daily life. At the basis of this connection is the interaction between artist, performers (if used), and audience that in effect create a ground for the expression of ideas between all involved.

The historical context of performance from which Horn has emerged has from the beginning been interested in breaking down barriers. Performance artists strive to break

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the barriers between performer and audience and between various artistic practices and forms of entertainment such as music, theater, and the circus. At the heart of performance art is the breaking down of social ideas and the barriers between individuals so as to create grounds for new interaction of thought. The basic reality of this situation, that within Horn’s work has a greater expression within alchemy, is the isolation of the various aspects of Western life. Isolation, caused by the nature of compartmentalizing life’s activities, within Western societies affects how we as individuals manifest our creative energies and envision the purpose of the world. There has always been within performance art a desire to radicalize art and reevaluate its presence within everyday life. Some of the similarities between the Futurists and Horn is their mutual interests in musical instruments. Like the Futurists, Horn also employs music and creates a type of noise instrument by mechanizing instruments from violins that play themselves to pianos that spit out their keys. Both types of performance environments employ absurdity tinged with madness, with the Futurists more interested in a type of social chaos. The Futurists also employed not only literary ideas, but also vaudevillian theatrics and acrobatic gestures. This type of absurd theater exists to a different degree within the film antics of Buster Keaton. Keaton is a muse of sorts for Rebecca Horn, with his vaudevillian antics and actions that move into the chaotic and the absurd. Keaton for Horn is someone who used his seemingly magical abilities to move beyond the confines of society and his creative abilities to deal with complex situations.

65Ibid., 7.
66Ibid., 17.
First Dadaism and later Surrealism picked up on the ideas of Jarry and another literary and theatrical influence, Raymound Roussel. Roussel's style, for lack of a better term, is Surreal (or fantastic) and even alchemical in nature. Roussel is also an influence on Rebecca Horn. Dadaism takes various guises, from the political Zurich Dadaists to the seemingly non-political in Kurt Schwitters. Dadaism as a whole was more interested in going beyond logic and had varying ideas on the machine than the Futurists who were more interested in industrial progress. The Dadaists wanted social expansion. They generally have more interest in the conceptual side of artistic activity. In contrast, the Futurists' concern was with social anarchy. Surrealism also desired a form of social anarchy; and they carried out their ideas through the association of subconscious and waking life.

The artistic growth and change of performance continued throughout the early twentieth century in the Bauhaus and with Oscar Schlemmer. Schlemmer explored ideas of humans and machines, sense and nonsense, the opposites of life epitomized in the Greek gods Apollo (reason) and Dionysus (intuition and fecundity). Schlemmer used dance to explore these concepts as well as the study of space in theater as a metaphor for the space of life. Horn also explores the importance of space. The use of movement and dance continues to be important in performance as explored in the work of Merce Cunningham and Issidora Duncan. Both of whom were two pioneers of modern dance, who along with the Zen musical ideas of John Cage, are important in the concepts of art being immersed in

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life. Dance is another element of importance that Horn has employed throughout her career, epitomized by the tango.

Performance artists continue to explore various ways of interaction between art and life. Joseph Beuys carried on this exploration in the late '50s and '60s. Through his work, Beuys created dramatic actions and has an interest in awakening the consciousness of the public. His work has an overt religious and shamanistic aspect to it. Bruce Naumann and Marina Abramovic, two contemporaries of Horn's, are both involved in performance art. Naumann uses the movement of the body in space to express sculptural presence and the body as a sculptural element, while Abramovic deals with the limits of physical body and with forms of ritual. Horn works from elements expressed by both Naumann and Abramovic along with her own expression of the sensual in art. The artistic environment out of which Horn chronologically and stylistically developed had an extensive lineage of artists and artistic movements. These artists and movements have continually pushed the notions of what art is and how it functions. Horn carries on the tradition of artists interested in the interaction between various aspects of human existence.

Horn's early performances are alchemical in a basic fashion in that they foster the amalgamation of diverse realities and they engage in a form of personal transformation that dissolves personal barriers in a way that exists beyond the dogmatic approach of personal spiritual growth as occurs in the major religions, i.e. Christianity or Buddhism.

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69 Ibid., 175.
Rebecca Horn's own notes on her work support and expand the ideas presented on performance art and help set the stage for an examination of some of her early performances.

Rebecca Horn: Performance Art: For each performance in the years 1968-1972 the number of participants was limited, because intense interpersonal perception is only possible in a small circle of people. Each situation should result in dissolving barriers between passive spectators and active performers. There should be only be participants. Each performance has a central figure, who functions as a starting point and the goal of the activity. What the central figure wears provides a means of communication among the participants. The performer's idiosyncrasies, determine the shape of a particular performance. The basis of the performance, then, is a specific relationship. During this relationship a framework of desires, fantasies, and projections becomes apparent, suggesting particular ways for presentation of the person. The 'garment' is constructed on, and fitted to, the body of the person who will wear it. As his body is fitted into this mould, and he wears it time after time, identification begins to develop. This psychological mechanism is essential for the performance. During the performance the person is isolated, separated from his every-day environment. This specialized area is used to further self-perception. These performances, then, are attempts at creating new models of interaction rituals. (Notes 1972, Rebecca Horn)70

Within the context of her early performances, Horn facilitated interaction between the participants of the performance in an environment that was conducive to the expression of personal ideas between an intimate group of people who helped shape the performance as it appeared to the public. The type of interaction that existed within Horn's early performances broke down barriers between the personal and the social. This barrier is one of the fundamental levels of interaction that needs to occur before further levels of interaction can take place that deal with larger ideas as the expression of the spiritual in daily life. As far as alchemy is concerned within modern contexts, the reduction of isolation is necessary for the type of interaction of the alchemical within the

strata of everyday life. At the basis of alchemy is the interconnection between the various facets of existence. In such a context, alchemically inspired actions function as the intermediary principle between the performers.

Within her performances, such as Arm Extensions, Horn is interested in creating new ways of ritual interaction to respiritualize the situation of contemporary miscommunication and alienation that Horn felt so desperately during and after her illness. It was during that period she felt the confinements of medical isolation as another separation between the healing powers that exist between self and community.

For Horn, performance acts as an intermediary between herself and her audience. The occasion that prompted Horn to engage in performance in the ways that she did was her bout with illness. Horn’s illness focused her attention on how we as people communicate. Her sense of body expanded, and she questioned the nature of medical practices, immobilization, medication, and the discontinuity of time; the confinement due to her illness fostered mental activity. The physical immobilization transformed into mental contemplation, and the mental was in turn displaced again into the physical. The doctors made her life a nightmare in the sanitarium with their view of recovery as a time-controlled process. They attempted to keep Horn institutionalized for ever-increasing lengths of time. She did a lot of reading and drawing during her illness, and drawing, as always, was paramount to her creative process. The act of performance, or ritual, as Horn herself described some of her undertakings, is akin to the alchemical process. Through the action of her performances, the barriers between various aspects of life are brought together in a new state of interaction. This interaction occurs through the transformative
aspects of Horn’s body as vessel for transformation, a sculptural space that breaks down the barrier between performer and audience. The ritual space of the performance sets up a place for personal interaction and the blending of elements that have been predominantly separated throughout Western art. Horn’s early performances, by questioning and expanding ways of perceiving and experiencing the body, have laid the groundwork for the further expansion of the current context of Western perspectives. This process is necessary for all of our personal advancements and for the ability to encapsulate multiple perspectives in a fluid, yet unifying theory, such as alchemy. One of the outcomes of Horn’s early performances is that we as individuals move from being voyeurs of life in a materialistic vein into the role of participant.
CHAPTER V

MECHANICS OF BODY INTERPRETATION IN MEASURE BOX AND OVERFLOWING BLOOD MACHINE

Before an occult or mystical practice such as alchemy can take hold within the type of cultural framework that exists within the West, prevailing notions that are upheld within science, mathematics, psychology, and the like have to be questioned. This questioning must take place so that possibilities that exist beyond the scope of Western understanding are not discounted solely on grounds that they do not fit within the prevailing notions of reality and rationality. The ways in which we map out, measure, read, build on, and explore the space around us reflects and subsequently influences the type of society we will have and the type of people we will be within that society. The social spaces and frameworks that contain us are also extensions of who we are as people and something that infuses our presence as an individual. By placing focus on the nature of how we interact with our environment, Horn raises questions of how a device can measure human existence, how measuring devices shape the larger structure of our interaction with ourselves. The types of associations and conclusion that we are able to draw from the world around us are predicated on the way we view that world. The alchemically inspired work of Horn helps to open the culture symbols and structures of Western society to new
associations so as to reveal that other realities exist in a world that Western eyes see in a predominantly mundane and mechanical fashion.\(^{71}\)

*Measure Box* (1970) takes the concept of medical confinement and perception of the body to the level of mechanistic and materialistic thinking as a form of containment and existence (See Fig. 4.). It explores both the influence of the nature of medical philosophy in relation to how we view our bodies and also in how we perceive ourselves in relation to the world around us. *Measure Box* is a life-size box that actually measures the body with moveable metal rods along the posts of each side. *Measure Box* consists of metal rods several feet long, that, when pulled out, create an empty space. A space is created to contain a body in order to measure its contours.\(^{72}\) By focusing on the collection of phenomenological data as a reflection of human reality, a large sphere of human perception, understanding, and creation is left unseen because of its amorphous character. Western society has a tendency to trust only what is seen through science. This aspect of Western society is accentuated in the structure of *Measure Box*.

The box is a regimented structure that has the appearance of a device designed to pierce the body. For the act of measurement to occur, the individual has to enter the mechanism; the metal rods press against the body’s contour in four directions. The measurement of the body is then perceived in a three-dimensional way, as a sort of contour map of the human body. This three-dimensional perception does not exist without the physical body. There exists a level of irony in the work, an absurd aside that,

\(^{71}\) Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), xi-xii.

in order for the measurement to occur, the confinement and accuracy of the box must cease. As the box opens, the integrity of the three-dimensional imprint dies. What remains is a fragment or ghost of the individual that was once there. *Measure Box* can only achieve a reading when the individual stands still. Thus, the measurement only gives a partial reading of individuals, an isolated view of who they are. The stillness necessary is akin to the type of stillness required during an x-ray to assure the accuracy of the image. The image imprint that is left over becomes one way to know about the person who was once there, as a sort of schematic drawing.

Formally, *Measure Box* is created of metal. Metal is a material created through the manipulation of earthly elements. The process of ancient metallurgy was likely the impetus behind alchemy and is part of the process of self revelation in the study of how various materials interact. In the context of contemporary society, metal and the process of achieving metal is used and viewed primarily in an utilitarian way. The metaphorical process of creating metals and various other substances is something that has been stripped away by systemization of mechanical creation and in the process we have usurped the hand of nature. The outcome of such an action is that a type of symbolic respect and interaction between ourselves and the world around us has been removed. Within the alchemical system such a connection between the self and the processes of creation within the universe and our manipulation of these processes has a similarly utilitarian and spiritual context.  

73 The spiritual content of alchemy was reduced by its users as the predominance

of scientific thought increased and spirituality was relegated to a separate realm. The broad use of metals, from mass-transportation to cooking and eating utensils, is one of the defining properties of industrialized societies.

*Measure Box* is partially an instrument, something used to gather data, mimicking an instrument used in empirical studies. The initial response of imprisonment, that occurs on several levels, still exists although the formal use of black for the architecture of the box and the use of white for the dowels visually creates a struggle, one between the measurable and the unseen (occult). A struggle exists that is exemplified by the Cartesian dualism between mind (spirit) and body that the prison of the box exemplifies. Descartes was a mathematician whose concepts of what constituted human knowledge has played a very significant role in Western thought. Charles Taylor sums up the importance of Descartes in the following quotation: "...Descartes offers a new understanding of reason, and hence of its hegemony over the passions,...as the essence of morality. Some change became inevitable, once the cosmic order was no longer seen as embodying the Ideas....The universe was to be understood mechanistically." The mechanistic thinking advanced by Descartes has gained such a state of importance that questions of human knowledge as reflected in a spiritual sense have been reduced to finding expression in New Age mantras. There does not exist a sense of ritual connection to the world as expressed in occult practices like alchemy that envisioned transformation within the processes of life as a whole.

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Within the confines of Measure Box, the body has to be separated from the world in which it exists and turned into an object of outward contemplation. The visual conflict of the horizontal dowels to the predominant verticality of the box supports this reading of the work. Also, since the box is a primitive measuring device, it has a totemistic quality about it. The destruction of the box’s containment leaves behind the negative space of the individual as a type of death mask. The impossibility of any one single device to measure, examine, delegate or map out the wholeness of human presence is one meaning in Measure Box.

The residual image also reflects an alchemical notion. When two objects collide, or in the case of Measure Box, when a contrived space of physical examination collides with another object (the human body), the after effect reveals a third element. This third element exemplifies how diverse objects relate. In the case of Measure Box, the third element is the residual ghost image of the body that begs the question of how the resulting image can offer a sense of knowledge and understanding when the image that remains raises more questions than it answers. Measure Box, in part, represents the limitations behind the types of thinking, perception, and measurement within Western society in which the knowledge gained from an experience largely comes from our peering upon another object and not the contact and change that occurs when we as Westerners come upon something other than ourselves. This other can exist within our society or within other societies that we have our predominant contact through various media from newspapers to the television. In Measure Box, the two realities of the body as a spiritual presence beyond confinement and the act of mechanistic and materialistic measurement
inform the other’s reality by the very nature of their presence. There exists a standard of measurement informed and changed by the presence of the body. In the process of each object informing one another, a new standard of measurement is being set forth. One in which the presence or spirit of the body is opening up, mixing with and transforming current materialistic notions. This process of intermixing is an integral part of the alchemical process in which our inherent spiritual side is released from the confines of human perception and knowledge so as to learn from a higher spiritual source. Horn is therefore creating a new system of measurement that is interdimensional, encompassing more than one aspect of human existence. Her action of creating a new system of measurement has parallels to the piece by Duchamp called 3 Standard Stoppages (1913-1914) (See Fig. 5.). In this work, Duchamp employed the element of chance. He dropped three strings, each being a meter in length onto a canvas painted Prussian blue. He then varnished the string onto the canvas and cut the canvas containing the string into three pieces. Eventually, Duchamp cut three wooden rulers in the shape of the fallen string; each of the rulers was a different shape and length. Duchamp was interested in creating his own system of physics and concepts of four-dimensional space, a type of metaphysical space, for Duchamp creating a new physics of perception was important because it offered a way of perceiving life in a more creative capacity as something shaped by human imagination. It is in the respect of viewing life in an imaginative fashion in which we

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create our own attachment to the world and find our own way of harnessing life’s creative possibilities owes much to occult thinking as embedded in Hermetic and alchemical thought and in the system of pataphysics created by Alfred Jarry. Jarry’s system of pataphysics states that all perceptions of the universe are imaginatively created. Within this system, the nature of human existence, while still holding influence over us, is not fully known and it is up to us to create ourselves, to make ourselves against the backdrop of life. Nothing humans do can reach the true reality of existence, therefore, everything we create has its basis in the imagination. Thus we are all gods in our own universe. Within this system, the human becomes the creative agent instead of a passive character. The residual image in Measure Box reflects a similar notion in that the device can only touch upon human reality.

The ghost reflection of human presence in Measure Box that remains is almost eerie in its level of emptiness. The negative space raises questions about the kind of person who was there and thus transforms the box of measurement and confinement to a question of human presence and what constitutes human presence. Presence has two levels, one the physical and the other the aura or spirit of the individual that has a residual quality. The level of questioning raised by Measure Box moves into the creative process of Overflowing Blood Machine (1970). Overflowing Blood Machine functions as a conceptual opening into the connection between mind and body as a way of allowing

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broader access to subconscious and spiritual impulses that were illuminated in *Measure Box*.

*Overflowing Blood Machine* is a constructed circulatory system worn on the outside of the body (See Fig. 6.). The wearer and performer has become an integral part of the overall work, as in *Arm Extensions*. The performer stands on top of a metal rectangular vitrine constructed of sheet metal and glass. The metal of the vitrine has an industrial look about it; within the vitrine is a pumping and circulating mechanism. A red liquid circulates inside. Plastic tubing runs out of the vitrine, up the body in a vertical fashion. The tubing is held to the body by four horizontal plastic bands located at the knees, groin, and upper and lower torso. The tubing continues over the shoulders and down the backside and back into the vitrine. The nature of the work is that there exists an abundance of blood, a spiritually distilled life force that is alchemical in nature. The excess of blood that runs beyond the confines of the body turns the performer into a type of fountain or distillation device. In *Overflowing Blood Machine*, the circulatory system becomes the machine and fountain of human existence. The medical apparatus and body system function as both a utilitarian and an artistic system that questions the boundaries between science and art.\(^2\) Inclusion of the audience in the work as the wearer of the circulatory device increases the level of participation. Both *Measure Box* and *Overflowing Blood Machine* explore the function and metaphor of the interior and exterior of human reality. The two works start a process of allegorizing the mechanical and the scientific

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that in *Overflowing Blood Machine* is subsumed under the guise of a medical apparatus. Both works start the process of reinvesting Western culture with the spiritual aestheticizing the machine into a mechanomorphic creation, and by doing this the prison, of the mechanical is being returned to the context of the body. The scientific machines become fantastic machines that in the case of *Overflowing Blood Machine* becomes an extension of the body. Thus, as in alchemy, in which the separation between the body and the spiritual universe is dissolved, so is gulf between science and the total self dissolved. Because the mechanism of *Overflowing Blood Machine* is an extension and creation of the human mind and body, it is therefore a construction of the human mind and therefore is not a total reality unto itself. In the two works, inner and outer realities start to collide, thus lending to an expansion of spiritual insights and the further growth into an alchemical process in which a more complete combination can occur between the forces of science and the spiritual through the intermediary creative presence of art. Alchemy, by its nature, exists at the crossroads between science and religion (supernatural).  

It exists as a tool for magical transformation through the manipulation of earthly materials so as to gain knowledge and incite spiritual transformation within the self that would subsequently find its way into the universe at large since the human and the universe (cosmos) are integrally connected and not separated as in Western perception, for as the alchemist says, As it is above (in the heavens) so it is below (on earth).

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The mixing of occult and mystical concepts with Western materialistic and scientific precepts within Horn’s early work laid the groundwork for the creation of an alchemical system of thought that manifests itself through Rebecca Horn’s artistic creations. The first level of creating an alchemical system of interaction, having laid the groundwork through the reclaiming of the body and the opening of prevailing Western frameworks of thought, is the release of subconscious thought that is trapped behind the ego. With the opening of subconscious thought comes the creation of alchemical allegories and myths that prepare the mind for the type of thinking and association that occurs within the alchemical process of inner transformation. Horn’s performance Unicorn (1970-72) is one such work that uses the alchemical symbol of the unicorn as its basis and which creates, in a physical form, a living mythic and mystical image. The following excerpt from Rebecca Horn’s writings recounts the making of Unicorn and the type of image created through the transformation of an everyday individual into a mythic creature. The performance harnessed the performer’s own creative way of expression in her walk and heightened these sensibilities in a grand presentation of self through the unicorn as reflection and further personification of the individual. The transformative

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action of *Unicorn* is expressed within Horn’s own reflection upon the work:

Rebecca Horn: *Unicorn (Einhorn)*, 1971

in a ‘glimmerous’ heat
out of a cradled field
a little white tip
points in your general direction
When I saw her first on the street, walking by-(me dreaming my own ‘unicornian’
dreams)-her strange rhythm, one step in front of the next...
All was like an echo-shock of my own imagination. Her movements, a flexibility:
(knowing how to use the legs entirely), but the rest of her: frozen in ice, from head to
hips and back again.
Drinking coffee, talking politics and me, (how to express to a person, ready to marry at
twenty-one and buying with all her money a bedroom set, my own beliefs in life?)-And
the complications and explanations, that I did wish to build a certain instrument, a stick
made ‘only’ out of wood, for her own head, to pinnacle her way of walking.
Next weeks, finding right proportions, body weights and object heights, distances and
balances...The performance took place in early morning-still damp, intensely bright-the
sun more challenging than any audience,
creating a phenomenon around her...
her consciousness electrically impassioned, nothing could stop her trancelike journey:
in competition with every tree and cloud in sight...
and the blossoming wheat caressing her hips, but not her empty shoulders.

*Unicorn* is a filmed performance piece (See Fig. 7.). Horn was inspired by
someone she saw walking in the streets whose way of moving was something symbolically
powerful. It captured Horn’s vision of a unicorn. The two met and Horn talked her into
the performance, at first the performer experienced hesitation, but when the constructed
unicorn attachment sat on her head she transformed into a vision. Her beauty of
movement is at once fluid in the legs and hips and frozen in the torso. The body device
constructed primarily of white fabric starts off at the hips. The construction of *Unicorn*
consists of bands placed across the top of the legs, the hips, and two straps across the

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chest. All the bands fasten in the back, giving the appearance of a medical apparatus with the types of straps employed. A vertical strap, approximately four inches long, runs down the center of the body connecting up with a collar that covered the entire neck. The tautness of the straps gives the impression that they were supporting the body or focusing the already rigid posture of the torso. Two straps run from the collar to the skull cap that attaches the horn to the head. The materials employed in the work underwent a significant metamorphosis as they became part of the performer, and, as the two met, they transformed one another. The presence of the unicorn horn acts as a catalyst for the merging of the mundane materials and the human body into a presence that until that time existed in a state of separation. The creation of Unicorn is the embodiment of Horn’s own vision of a unicorn; thus the work manifests her inner subconscious visions, her inner creative and mystical visions that in turn helped to transform or unleash the unicorn that Horn saw living inside the performer whom she met on the street.

The activity of the Unicorn is the performer’s movement through wheat fields and forests. The performer is a specter equal to a mythical creature. Despite the nature of the horn device that accentuates the body movement, the presence of the performer creates an aura of fantastic beauty in which the spiritual has infused the physical. There exists an alchemical component in the transformation that occurs in Unicorn in that the hidden unicorn presence that existed in the performer was unleashed from a state of relative knowingness into one in which the presence and energy of the unicorn became an active part of the performer’s material existence in a conscious way. Through this type of action,
the individual can move into a higher state of self-realization in that each of us has an ideal self that wants to be expressed. This ideal self reaches out beyond the confines of the daily. Within alchemy, connection to a higher reality or engaging the supernatural is essential to personal attainment.

Unicorn deals with fantasy, projection, and idealism as another element of existence that informs our reality. Fantasy, projection, and idealism are some things that transform the material as did the attached unicorn horn. Unicorn started to bridge the space between the psyche and material existence in Western society. The fantastic in the presence of the unicorn acts as a type of psychic bridge and a two-way mirror. The unicorn has an alchemical capacity to liquefy or to melt away barriers so as to allow a stronger flow of activity between the various realms of human existence, such as between the body and the psyche. Unicorn acts as a force within alchemy that makes the spiritual tangible as a type of messenger from the gods, like the Roman god Mercury, and his Greek predecessor Hermes. Because of its association with Mercury and Hermes, the unicorn is termed a mercurial force as something that can take several forms simultaneously and as a volatile or quick material. Unicorn firmly establishes the ability of amalgamating the sacred and the profane within the context of the individual.

Another aspect of fantasy is that it is a type of symbolic language that brings together different peoples through a common point of interest, something that both parties can partake of in a language of awe and beauty, so the context of Unicorn extends beyond

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87Gernano Celant, "The Divine Comedy of Rebecca Horn," Rebecca Horn (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1993), 44.

the performer into a larger social context. The power of the fantastic and the mystical is that they have the ability to reveal the supernatural and spiritual elements that the possessor of these tools can see as existing within the whole of life. The unicorn is at once something that becomes representative of a supernatural presence at the same time that, by its knowable qualities, makes the supernatural tangible in a way that does not overwhelm. The unicorn funnels the power of nature as a product of the supernatural into a tangible reality that is an amalgamation of what the mind knows along with the fantastic elements as something the mind only can glimpse at. The unicorn is part of the alchemical system of thought that through, symbols, allegories, and ritual practices of material transformation, connects the mind with a higher state of knowledge. Unicorn is also part of the human ability to stay constant as a focus among the forces of nature, as a connection to the earthly with its mixture of actual and mystical traits (a horse body with a fantastic Horn). In alchemy, the powers of the universe have to be harnessed and manipulated so as to be condensed down into a manageable form that does not overwhelm, thus individuals must be initiated by another or by themselves in a systematic way so that they do not go beyond their means. The unicorn is not just a fantastic presence; it is also a performer, a physical being, thus fulfilling all the requirements of a folk tale according to M.M. Bakhtin. The mystical unicorn is not just in the form of an animal but also exists in a transformed human state, thus firmly situating the presence of the unicorn in the human body. This type of anthropomorphism is central to alchemy, in

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8Stephen Edred Flowers, Ph.D., Hermetic Magic: The Postmodern Magical Papyrus of Abaris (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1995), 159-161.
which all processes of the universe are connected to the spiritual transformation of humans. While the individual was present and informed the work, the focus was beyond the personal and mundane. The larger focus was the construction of a place that, like the unicorn, expands the confines of personal body-space trajecting into the parameters of another reality, that while enveloping the mundane, surpasses it to encompass the spiritual. Thus, Unicorn linked together a group of people and diverse realities through a mythic conception.  

The horn of the unicorn is the presence that makes the unicorn a fantastic creature. The horn extends the earth bound body of the unicorn into the heavens as a pinnacle that visually connects the heavens and the earth. The horn generally is a symbol of power, a phallic projection that exemplifies permanence in its tough bone white appearance. This sense of power and permanence is juxtaposed against the feminine presence of the performer. Alchemically speaking, the white horn, in one respect, symbolizes new movement into and from the dark inner sanctums of the earth; thus, it is a facilitator and beginning point in the alchemical transformation into a more fully spiritualized self. The whiteness of the unicorn contrasts and makes it appear more visually aligned with the clouds in the sky.

The fields that the unicorn traverses are the common place of everyday, earthly presence, symbolizing a seemingly simpler form of a life, an ideal that is often times couched in terms of the peasant. The life of the peasant is anything but free and simple.

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A romantic notion exists in the open landscape of the peasant as an Arcadian conception a place for a Bacchanal/Dionysian rite. The peasant is symbolic as a purveyor of this life. The beauty and brilliance of the unicorn’s white horn are a point of concentration in the vastness of the open fields. The horn is a beacon and a focal point of transcendence from the vast void of nature, that while symbolic of freedom, needs a counterbalance. Otherwise, the eye would become overwhelmed and lost. The unicorn at once transcends the earthly domain and exemplifies the potential force of the earthly.

The importance and the purpose of symbol and allegory in the alchemical process in *Unicorn* was a connection with dissolution and meditation through fantasy and myth. The symbol in alchemy is a point of meditation and reflection that creates a state of mental trance to disarm the ego through fantasy and confusion, thus allowing a freer flow of thoughts. Reflection becomes an entryway into occult darkness in which an expanded knowledge and reflected image of self emerge through conflict. Self-knowledge is a process of which the total results never become known. *Unicorn* is one of the earliest blatant alchemical symbols in Horn’s *oeuvre* as the symbol of the *spiritus mercurius*, the ever-changing nature of the spirit.\(^9\) The unicorn as an amalgamation of a factual and a fantastic animal exemplifies the malleable quality of the unicorn. *Unicorn* is a perfect vision of a ritual unfolding in the mind’s eye. The unraveling of *Unicorn*’s possibilities that occurs in the living ritual of movement and expansion also occurs in *Mechanical Body Fan* (1973-74) and *White Body Fan* (1972). The ritual of movement and expansion of

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Unicorn moves farther into the body with the body fans which transforms the body into a space of incredible transformation.

Mechanical Body Fan is composed of two semicircular body fans measuring approximately eight feet in diameter and connects to the body with a harness that looks like the strapping mechanism for a parachute (See Fig. 8.). Two straps run across the shoulders to a strap around the waist forming a “V” shape. Another strap runs from the waist between the legs and attaches to the waist strap in back. The supports that continue over the shoulders are metal. A cross beam, also of metal, runs between the shoulder straps and attaches to the body fans in a way that allows for a wide range of movement. The fans themselves are of fabric attached in two continuous pieces with metal spines running through them. The precise way in which the body fans are constructed gives the appearance of a flying mechanism designed by Leonardo da Vinci, who is one of the artists Horn admires.\textsuperscript{92} The metal spines connects to a closed “U” frame that connects to the body fans with metal rods that supported the weight of the fans and added to their tinsel strength.

The body fan works are a combination of the fantasy of Unicorn, with the body expansion and mechanical forms of earlier works. The body fans are both a sculptural construction and a performance. The works need the presence of the human body to have their meaning expanded and completed. This aspect of the work is very alchemical in that the combining of separate materials leads to a third element that is a combination and

\textsuperscript{92}Rebecca Horn, interview by Germano Celant, \textit{Rebecca Horn} (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1993), 18.
transformation of the two. The body fans are a living example of the outcome of movement into the conceptual space of the unicorn as a mercurial force. They encompass the malleable qualities of the subconscious as a perpetually changing ritual that symbolically transforms what it comes into contact with metamorphosing what they touch into something that can manifest multiple possibilities simultaneously. The body fans not only expand the senses and extends the containment of the body into the space around them, there is also a more thorough change in the use of mechanics in the body fans in that the mechanical presence is no longer a source of total confinement. Rather, the mechanism of the body fans exists as a system of interaction to be explored as an alchemical and magical flight from one level of containment to another level of attainment with its own challenges and parameters. The body fans exist as a device that expands and verifies that Horn is creating a spiritually infused reality through her work. Malleability and transformation are at the heart of the alchemical process, and the presence of the body fans fits perfectly into the mythic and occult reality set forth in Unicorn. The body fans speak of the vast expanse of possibility that can occur when the subconscious as a parallel to what the supernatural can entail. By accessing the subconscious, Unicorn and the body fan works allow for the exploration of the psyche, which is a facet of occult darkness in Western societies. Paradise Widow (1975) perfectly symbolizes this entry into occult darkness (See Fig. 9.). The presence of Paradise Widow exemplifies the dangerous
side of all occult and supernatural situations in that inherently in all situations of change, those involved in the process are in a vulnerable state.95

The dark aspect of *Paradise Widow* is akin to the blackening stage in alchemy in which a state of total destruction takes place as a type of burning of the fields. This part of the alchemical process allows for a separation to occur between what is necessary and what is not. Blackness creates a place of destruction that borders on death or total release in which everything is let go of, and to move from this stage, the individual needs to decide what is necessary and what is not. The nature of this state is vulnerability and fear because boundaries are weak. This vulnerability can be dangerous in a number of ways, such when the individual is ill prepared. The state of confusion that can occur upon self-reflection is due to the fact that reflection into the mirror of self creates a multiplicity of perceptions in which you exist in an in-between, or liminal state, in which no firm identity exists.96 This and other dangerous complications that occur in process of deep change, with the possibility of changing deep held beliefs, are a recurring element throughout Horn’s work as a mirror reflection that exists alongside all powerful states of transformation. It is in part for this reason of endangering oneself and others that the alchemical process of transformation was embedded in opaque writings, according to some alchemists so that the adept must figure out initial concepts before moving into the main actions; a sort of initiation that occurs in Horn’s early works.

The larger-than-life phallus-womb made of black feathers is an all encompassing

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95Ibid., 323-337.
force. The use of the black feathers in such a monolithic yet movable work is a perfect embodiment of the dark side of the human psyche. Horn has created a feeling of dark isolation of an all encompassing presence into physical existence. *Paradise Widow* is not just an idea. It is a living being something that confronts and challenges the mind and senses. Its presence brings a state of mind closer to the surface in such a way that allows the viewer to participate in their own fantasy or nightmare.

The formal nature of the feathers is a tactile presence that gives *Paradise Widow* an extra layer of significance and fantasy in that the materials are obviously bird feathers. Bird feathers conjure up a host of personal, cultural, and spiritual meanings from the fascination with flying to the gravity-defying presence that birds have. The presence of flight in *Paradise Widow* is supported by a quotation from Katharina Schimdt: "Like a fascinating fetish, this life-size stele made of Chinese cock’s feathers embraces the woman’s body with all her unfulfilled desires, as it begins to open, spreading its living core of tenderness and longing, it seems poised to fly away." On the other hand, the fact that the structure of the piece is non-bird like lends credence to the subconscious aspects of the work. This leads one to the question as to what the piece really is. Is *Paradise Widow* a bird spirit that has taken the remnants of once living birds to create itself as a new entity? Is *Paradise Widow* some daemonic force (a strange subconscious impulse or drive) taking on the presence of a bird?

The dark power of *Paradise Widow* is made apparent in Rebecca Horn’s personal

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writing on the piece. Horn's poetic description of the work exemplifies the type of facing of anxieties and fears that must occur before the all encompassing force of the supernatural can be brought into material existence. The power of the supernatural that is the source of knowledge for the alchemists is something that completely transforms those who partake of it. It reshapes every perception of reality. The dark presence of the supernatural is feared in some non-Western societies as a force that can possibly kill those who are not prepared to deal with its power, a power that has a dark side due to the fact that the supernatural encompasses death, destruction, and the afterlife. Although, without facing the possibilities inherent in all aspects of spiritual growth, the conflictual, or as the alchemists perceive, the chaotic side of existence would exist as a force beyond human use, thus putting the individual at the mercy of the forces of the universe and disallowing the participants growth into spiritual being and therefore unable to complete their spiritual tasks. The dark presence of Paradise Widow is exposed in Horn's own personal writings:

Rebecca Horn: *Paradise Widow (Paradieswitwe)*, 1975

This month is not an endless snake, more a million-legged thorny monster, Besides my work, nothing else should be in my head, only, how can I open my daily conversation with my twelve-legged Paradise Widow! I have to chase her a little bit today: She sits now in her shadow—since July 23rd—speedless, motionless...trembling, sometimes...sucking all the sun spots in my room away; staring at me...Thirty meters of black feathers standing up straight in my room, and sometimes I am completely terrified when I wake up and perceive that black monster.98


Cross-culturally black is symbolic of some aspect of death or of a death process, as something that is often construed as monstrous or treacherous. "Black in fairly generalized terms, seems to represent the initial, germinal stage of all processes, as it does in alchemy. In this connection, Blavatsky points out that Noah released a black crow from the ark before he sent out the white dove." Humans cannot grow without darkness, just as we become inhibited in how we function if we do not at some time seek sleep. We need this re-emergence into a place where the elements of our life intermingle in a way that creates connections that do not always readily make sense. The seemingly meaninglessness of dreams and fantasy exist because the mind functions with so many realities simultaneously, thus allowing for the mind to roam free and explore any possible connection. This act of roaming is a way of reconnecting to a state of existence that extends beyond the bounds we allow ourselves to exist within. This expansion is something that the mind and soul need since growth occurs in places that we might be touching but are not into just yet. There exists a mysterious, quiet, and dark side to Horn’s work that relates to the side of life so dark and unknowing “that the most dexterous man upon earth could not have expounded them.” Black, as a symbolic color of death, is frequently indicative of a loss of total self perception, as a process through which a new vision of self can be fostered.

Black crows, black doves, and black flames figure in a great many legends. They are

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all symbols closely related to primal (black, occult, or unconscious) wisdom which stems from the Hidden Source. Here, Jung points to the relevance of the ‘dark night’ of St. John of the Cross and the ‘germination in darkness’...for both Victor Hugo and Richard Wagner (black) signifies the maternal, and that light appearing out of the gloom represents a kind of crystallization. Jung also points out in this connection that carbon—the predominant chemical component in Man’s organism—is black in so far as it is charcoal or graphite, but that, in so far as it is a diamond (that is, crystallized carbon), it is ‘crystal-clear water,’ thus underlining the fact that the profoundest meaning of black is occultation and germination in darkness. In this he is supported by Guenon, who maintains that black stands for all preliminary stages, representing the ‘descent into hell,’ which is a recapitulation of (or an atonement for) all the preceding phases. Thus, the dark earth-mother—the Diana of Ephesus—was depicted with dark black hands and face, recalling the black openings of caves and grottos. Amongst primitive peoples, black is the colour associated with inner or subterranean zones. Black also sometimes comes to symbolize time, in contrast to white which represents timelessness and ecstasy.104

Within Paradise Widow, the mind is isolated in darkness and is giving in to what is about to happen as the form of new possibilities emerges from the subconscious. The action of release to darkness is an attraction and a fear something that is exemplified in a quote from Horn on her work entitled Chinese Fiancée, 1976: “Relaxation, or rather, the surrendering to same...Submission to the darkness and the tight closed moment...And then (so suddenly), the doors all opening to release you once again; out into the most dazzlingly alarming brightness.”105 Sometimes the nature of growth is death, and the images created are sometimes difficult to take. In Paradise Widow, by putting on the mask of the large black bird, you transform into someone else, the self captured in the reflection of a larger reality. Just for one moment, the expansive power of life is revealed to you it is a darkness so beautiful and terrifying, something that absorbs all light. It is at this point that Horn’s

Paradise Widow can reveal something new. Paradise Widow is a larger-than-life mythical creature come to life, wearable by any individual. The usability of the piece instills it with a power of identity, something that can encompass the individual, something that is inescapably truthful. The works of Rebecca Horn do not all use large scale to create an all encompassing reality. Some of her works are small creatures that inhabit a world of wonderment.

Paradise Widow is at once a mask that covers and that exposes a deeper reality. Paradise Widow, like its name, is a paradox that expresses the darker side of an attitude that is at once carnivalesque and dark melodrama, an alluring vision of dark beauty. "The animal mask, a symbol of the dichotomy of life and death in the Dionysos cult of ancient Greece, is for Rebecca Horn the source of conflict between tenderness and aggression."106 For Horn and Marcel Duchamp, the title of a work is of importance because it is part of the creative reality. With Paradise Widow, Horn has created a pun that expresses and elucidates the content of the work. The creation of a pun is like a verbal collage "juxtaposing two words with similar sounds but different meanings..." (or just with different meanings) "...and finding a verbal bridge between them. It is the carefully reasoned and delirious development of the principle that inspires the pun. What is more, it is like the conception of language as a structure in movement."107 Both Marcel Duchamp and Rebecca Horn employ Raymond Roussel’s literary method. Roussel’s literary method employs puns, placing them into the level of the plastic in art. Reality moves

beyond social restrictions and brings art into life. Roussel influenced another aspect of Duchamp and Horn's work, epitomized in the following quote: "There is no need to seek for the origins of Duchamp's delirious machines. The union of these two words—'machine' and 'delirium,' 'method' and 'madness'—brings to mind the figure of Raymond Roussel." With the combination of animal forms, phallic and womb-tomb like forms, *Paradise Widow* gives vision to a larger life process such as birth and death. *Paradise Widow* is a seducer and destroyer in that it can open up to encompass another in an erotic enclosure. The birth and death aspect of *Paradise Widow* can be a solitary moment or a mutual death through passion. With the exploration of the subconscious that Horn had accessed through *Unicorn* and *Paradise Widow*, she gained the ability to explore the various ways to express inner desires as occurs in the personal and cultural actions that shape the daily life of Western existence as a whole. By embracing the dark side of change that comes from the dissolution of the ego and preconceived notions of life, without giving into the fear that ensues, Horn has manifested through *Paradise Widow* the deeper level of transformation embodied within *Unicorn*.

CHAPTER VII

QUESTIONS OF INTERACTION IN PERFORMANCE, HUMANS AND MACHINES:

MOVEMENT BETWEEN THE SACRED AND PROFANE

Horn's performance Cutting One's Hair with Two Scissors at Once (1974-75), exemplifies the movement between the realm of idealization or ideology (spirituality) and the daily (See Fig. 10.). The performance takes the earlier connection that Horn made between the sacred and the profane a step further. The sacred is now directly linked to the mundane activity of cutting the hair, thus allowing for the link between the sacred and the profane to be deepened in that the sacred or possibly ritualistic overtones of daily activities and practices are revealed. Parallels to alchemical notions of reality are revealed in the action of Horn's performance. Alchemy is a process of revealing the sacred within us all through the realization of sacred properties contained within the materials and processes of life. 

Movement between the sacred and the profane is symbolized by the presence of psychoanalysis, and Horn's everyday existence is symbolized by the cutting of hair. In the performance, the action of Horn cutting her hair is interpreted by a psychoanalyst who acts as a bridge between her subconscious and material reality. This dialogue creates a point of contact with a primary way of self expression. Freud and Jung used

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psychoanalysis to delve into areas that were not being faced through religion and Western society. Psychoanalysis, therefore, exists as link to the aspects of life not answered through conventional thinking as a type of replacement for religion as an intermediary between the sacred and the profane or between the subconscious and the material self. In this case, the self-expression exemplified through the cutting of hair as a type of physical fetish and an outward expression of personality and sexuality in the West. The fetish deals with the association or merger with another being that deals with the power of self expression.\footnote{\textsubscript{111}E.L. Macallum, “How to Do Things with Fetishism,” \textit{Differences} 7.3 (1995): 24-48.} The fetish mimics the presence of another being and offers a mirror to how we want to be perceived and treated. These aspects of fetish are at the core of fashion as a personal identifier and psychic mask. Horn’s work is therefore ritual clothing that is at times an actual object to wear and at others a fantasy projection for the mind.\footnote{\textsubscript{112}Giuliana Bruno, “Interiors: Anatomies of the Bride Machine,” \textit{Rebecca Horn} (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1993), 91.} The performance moves beyond the more contained world of the fantastic in earlier performances. The metaphorical, the subconscious, and the symbolic became connected to more mundane activities in order to expand the circle of reality that we exist within.

The act of touching, through the instrument of scissors, in \textit{Cutting One’s Hair with Two Scissors at Once} is expanded upon in \textit{Scratching Both Walls at Once} (1974-75).

\textit{Scratching Both Walls at Once} moves the state of anthropocentric presence of the body as a basic tenet of alchemy into the fuller expression of the alchemical tenet of the inner processes of the body contextualized within the totality of life. Even though the basic tenets of alchemy occur within the confines of the body, the total expression of alchemy
must go beyond the self as a physical entity into the realm of life where the spiritual self exists. In *Scratching Both Walls at Once*, Horn dons two sets of finger extensions made of balsa wood and fabric that allows her to feel out the parameters of a room through the devices (See Fig. 11.). The performance is a metaphorical way of exploring the contours and parameters of existence.\(^{113}\)

*Scratching Both Walls at Once* takes earlier sensory expansion and turns it into a larger mental and physical expansion. *Scratching Both Walls at Once* explores the notion of the types of rooms and containers that constitute human existence. The work touches the various levels of our existence with self desire and expression towards the goal of realization. The relationship between self and world mimics the relationship we have with ourselves and others. The performance expands the physically conceived transformations of the earlier performances, with their expansion of Western precepts and creation of the body as a sacred space, into a reality in which the internalized activities of alchemy are expressed beyond the body as the beginning of the process into the creation of a reality in which the transformation of the self finds its fullest expression. Horn uses a mirrored carafe in another performance entitled *Rooms Encountering Each Other* (1974-75) as a way of expanding the action of *Scratching Both Walls at Once*. The piece takes the touching of *Scratching Both Walls at Once* to a conceptual level of mental touching through the visual play of mirrored reflections with Narcissistic implications (See Fig. 12.). *Rooms Encountering Each Other*, in which Horn wears a mirrored cuirass to interconnect

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\(^{113}\) Toni Stooss, "Short Pictorial Anthology of ‘Touching,’" *Rebecca Horn* (Geneva: Centre d’Art Contemporain, 1983), 11.
to the space around her through mirrors, is an expansion to a virtual or conceptual level where personal sensory extension occurs. This extension occurs not through personal touch but rather through the act of having one’s self reflected into the space around, in a Narcissistic act of envisioning the self in other objects. *Rooms Encountering Each Other* amplifies the possibilities of actual interconnections set up in *Scratching Both Walls at Once*. *Rooms Encountering Each Other* paradoxically expands the body to understand the room as a metaphor of human existence. The element of touch, contact or communication is a powerful way to address this need. Touch is a powerful form of physical communication and contact and is the basic premise behind a performance entitled *Keeping Those Legs from Touching Each Other* (1974-75).

*Keeping Those Legs from Touching Each Other* is a dance-like performance between a couple in all black clothing who wear white straps with powerful magnets attached to opposite legs (See Fig. 13.). The white straps and magnets are not only on the legs but also the waist and hips. The black and white worn by each performer creates sameness and difference in each performer like yin and yang, with sameness attracting each other as a common basis of existence. The magnets necessitate that the two people move in a kind of dance, a courtship that explores the recurrent concept of movement between opposing forces. Erotic courtship of the male and female is a metaphor and an acting out for the state of the human soul, the various archetypal forces, the anima and

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animus as Jung calls them. Attraction and repulsion (inclusion and separation) lie at the heart of these two forces. *Mechanical Peacock Fan* (1979-80) and *Peacock Machine* (1982) carry courtship to a level of ritual.

Horn created *Mechanical Peacock Fan* to take the place of an actual peacock in her film *Der Einläufer* when being filmed because the peacocks did not have their feathers. The peacock feathers are attached to a mechanism that periodically raises the feathers from a lowered position (See Fig. 14.). *Peacock Machine* is not constructed with feathers but rather with aluminum quills (rods) (See Fig. 15.). These quills, attached to a mechanized system, contract or spread out and raise and lower on a periodic basis. There exists an act of feeling and extension in the movement of the quills that spread out to encompass the space within the peacock’s parameters. The movement of the feathers and quills reflect the parade of enticement that occurs across species in the process of finding a mate. The courtship process also involves fetishization in that the purpose and movement of courtship are the desired possession of a physical mate who also exists as an object of desire instilled with symbolic meaning. The levels of subconscious projection that occur with erotic contact help fulfill our conceptions of who we are and want to be. The battle that ensues with the daemonic forces gives rise to conflict. The mechanistic and anthropomorphic qualities of the peacock machines expand the notion of body transformation into mechanized sculptures. The peacock machines encompass and surpass body confinement so as to actualize the personal transformation within Horn’s early...

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performances in a way that manifests a broader change which occurs through the
manifestation of the personal expansion into a reality beyond the limits of the self. The
peacock machines expand the self into the surrounding world in a way that transforms the
social environment that we exist within by creating new levels of social and personal
interaction.

Mechanical Peacock Fan and Peacock Machine also possess the animal metaphor
of Unicorn that metamorphosed into a machine that has become a peacock. The peacock
is a spiritual metaphor in alchemy. The multiple colors of the peacock symbolize the depth
of possibility that lies within the dark confusion of the subconscious.\(^{119}\) The cyber-
organicism of the work acts as a stand-in for the performer, instilled with subconscious
desires and parallels of animal-sex and nature as the chaotic yet focusable aspect of
supernatural forces. For the alchemist believes animals such as the unicorn are beneficial,
but they also have their dark side. The courtship ritual of the peacock is a self-contained
reality that encounters and mirrors human reality as something that illuminates and
transforms how we react with the environment we have created and with the reality
beyond our social construction. The peacock fans are some of the initial creations within
the living philosophical system that Horn is presenting as a force of social change in a
parallel way to the artistic quest of Joseph Beuys, but not in pointedly religious way, but
rather as a spiritual quest. Mechanical Peacock Fan and Peacock Machine create a
confluence of possibilities filled with subconscious yearnings. Mechanical Peacock Fan

and Peacock Machine are a self-contained sculpture, unlike the body fans and Paradise Widow. The absence of direct human presence taps into a further level of symbolic attachment and creative possibilities between materials, symbol, and the actions that constitute and go beyond human presence. There is no physical human presence in Mechanical Peacock Fan and Peacock Machine. There does exist, however, a definite sense of humanity in the ritualistic movement that mimics human actions of desire with their multifarious meanings. The presence of human action and motivation moves into another realm of meaning in Radius Inscriber (1982).

Radius Inscriber is a mechanized piece that exemplifies the type of change and eventual questioning that will occur when the mechanized side of Western thinking questions its parameters as is the current movement in Western thought, as exemplified in contemporary physics. The Radius Inscriber is representative not only of how we as individuals within Western society perpetually create and question our own existence, it is also reflective of how systems of thought have a tendency to take on a life of their own as some religious dogma that we do not fully comprehend but rather follow out of tradition. When systems of thought gain their own life, one that starts to drive those who uphold and maintain the system of thought. The importance of works like Radius Inscriber is that they show how the spirit and the material can immerse together by questioning the impetus behind mechanical motivation. Radius Inscriber is a mechanized system that compels a long aluminum rod with a finger-like projection at the end to inscribe a circle on the wall (See Fig. 16.). The inscriber is not able to complete its circle due to its environmental constraints, and thus creates only a semi-circle. Part of the impulse of
*Radius Inscriber* is to create a socially demarcated place of interaction through the actions of a machine. The inscriber attempts to create a circle of completion on the (architectural) space it exists within.\(^{120}\) Paradoxically, *Radius Inscriber* scratches at the wall that confines it, so that the impulse towards rational closure is juxtaposed with an equivalent if not greater desire to escape its own self enclosure. The inscriber marks its space in the same way we scratch or partially mark our identity on the world through our tools, such as geometry. In the work there exists a constant movement to create an escape-valve; otherwise, its contained energy would coalesce into a state of madness. The inscriber is driven by a similar force of knowledge as the alchemist. But unlike the alchemist, who searches for knowledge within the spiritual universe, those who exist as the *Radius Inscriber* attempt to find knowledge in the realm of the explainable or in the realm of what will eventually be explained. Conversely, the alchemist, as does Horn, continues working with the insight that knowledge is not an object to be obtained but a process.

*Radius Inscriber* is different from earlier performances and the peacock machines in that it explores mechanistic action more as a necessary reality that needs reincorporating into a larger system of understanding instead of a system that needs to be questioned and displaced. The perception of space and time and the inscribing of human presence on the world is the focal point of *Radius Inscriber*. In *Pendulum* (1982), the action of *Radius Inscriber* moves to the level of an act that enfolds and transgresses the mundane as it reflects a ritualistic act of searching for the infinite. The mechanical searching in *Radius

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120 Toni Stoess, "Short Pictorial Anthology of "Touching."
"Rebecca Horn (Geneva: Centre d'Art Contemporain, 1983), 13-14.
Inscriber is taken to a level in which there exists a perpetual searching for something that exists beyond the self; something that is represented in the human attraction to forms that have an archetypal significance such as the egg. The initial impulse behind this searching is the same whether it occurs under the more knowing gaze of the alchemist, or that of the more materialistic individuals who on some level of consciousness searches for something more than the life they perceive.

Pendulum consists of an aluminum rod approximately six feet long. The motorized system periodically sends the rod into motion as it desperately swings away at an ostrich egg suspended about a foot off the floor. Even in stasis, the pendulum moves, touching the egg visually. This phenomenon attests to the power of symbolic attraction that persists on a continuum between condensed and ambiguous meaning. The symbolic attraction between the pendulum and the egg can exist in a state of virtual stasis, a perpetual state of interest, in which the symbol becomes part of the pendulum's existence. The ritualistic action of the pendulum is perpetual, mundane, bewildering, hypnotic, searching, and beautiful simultaneously.

Some people, when walking away from the piece after waiting a while for something to happen, heard the mechanism gear up and were immediately attracted. Most of people who saw the work in action went up for a closer look. The relationship between the egg and the pendulum intrigued people.

Upon viewing Pendulum at Site Santa-Fe during October 1995, I felt I witnessed a personal experience by watching people come, go, watch, and pass-by. The posture of the viewers moved from waiting to action. In this way, the viewers mirrored the activity of
the pendulum. People expected the person-machine to act. Sometimes it did and
sometimes it did not. These actions brought the viewer into the life of the machine-
person. The movements of the machine are organic and quirky in the way human
movements are both organic and mechanized. The machine indicates human time because
humans create the measurement of time by the pendulum or clock moving in a to and from
motion. Time is an integral part of how we perceive ourselves as existing within life, and
our perceptions of time structure significant human action and interaction from going to
work and school on time to the enactment of rituals at important times in human life.

We measure time with machines removed from human concerns. Time moves
without us, but humans make time. We measure it ourselves. Depersonalized and
removed time is universal, even as it is highly personal and relative. Experienced
differently at various moments, time is relative, sometimes moving slowly and at others
evaporating rapidly. Thus time, as with the movement of the pendulum, can either be
small or large in a human sense of time. The egg belongs to geological time; it is about
life and death beyond measurement since neither the moments of life nor the moments of
death escape us. The egg is also about life as a whole and not as a fragment. So the egg
and the pendulum are the eternal and the momentary as well the male (pendulum) and the
female (egg). When the egg meets the pendulum, the instrument of time, it is no longer

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121Germano Celant, "The Divine Comedy of Rebecca Horn" Rebecca Horn (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation,
1993), 44-45.
just an egg. It is an example of change, movement and "...it threatens the egg to
change."\(^{122}\)

Our movements help to access a certain part of our minds and psyches. Actions
have an actual and a symbolic meaning. Dancing accesses freedom and sexual feelings and
marching with a group of people in a military setting creates a framework of people
working together as cogs in a machine to create one larger entity. There exists in the
pendulum an action of attraction to the egg, which is gravity; the attraction is destined to
occur. This underlying force is something that pulls, often without our awareness. The
effect of union between the pendulum and the egg would be violent, but the change might
be spectacular, unleashing things that lie slumbering behind the thin skin that separates the
spirit from the physical.

Gold exists as a sublime presence parallel in symbolic import as a splendid
lightning storm, both of which are strong material symbols that attract us. There exists a
dangerous element between the egg and the pendulum that is the force of change that the
pendulum could afflict on the egg and vice-versa. The two connected in a chain of buried
possibilities that could undo one (the pendulum) and alter the other (the egg). One
dangerous element of the life between the two is that, in its process of attainment, the
pendulum opens itself up, its secrets revealed as when we expose ourselves to others. The
human-pendulum enacts an erotic courtship with the egg (spiritual forces), creating an
opening to the psyche and to the rhythm of another presence because there is a shared

\(^{122}\)Jackie M. and Jamye Janvion "A Kid's Guide to Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby," (Santa Fe: Museum
energy between the two. It is the movement to the shared energy in which our egos start
to open up and we momentarily lose our closed ego structures. At the same time that the
ego is opening up, there still exists a necessary state of separation between the egg and
pendulum. This separation is one that cannot be completely broken without physical
death. Without preparation, the consequences are dire in that a loss of self can occur. In
alchemy, the egg has a multitude of meanings as the following quotations demonstrate: “In
the language of Egyptian hieroglyphs, the determinative sign of the egg represents
potentiality, the seed of generation, the mystery of life. This meaning persisted among the
alchemists, who added explicitly the idea that it was the container for matter and for
thought.”123 “It is a kind of matrix or uterus from which the filius philosophorum, the
miraculous stone, is to be born.... Hence it is required that the vessel be not only round
but egg-shaped....”124 A sense of desire that does not conceive of what it is seeking, but
rather acts only out of being glamoured in a magical way leads one to a loss of
perspective.

The shot of energy that pushes the pendulum into motion is the spark of
possibility: the lighting of the fire within ourselves, the point of expansion where our
impulses can become known, why we do the things we do; but it is also a time of danger.
It is a time when we may become swept away and never see the essence or our actions.

What is the pendulum thinking? The impulses that drive this machine are random
to an extent, yet they are also perpetual as long as the pendulum is alive. The pendulum is

also time. Time as a fact remains. But, as a measurement conceived by humans, time disappears if the human presence does not exist. The perpetual nature of the pendulum exists in us humans, and both are constantly inconsistent. The constant inconsistency of the pendulum goes under the rubric of chaos theory in current physics. Chaos theory exists in the context of human action as the movement towards a common ideal and force from a random source of action.\(^{125}\) The pendulum embodies our physical reality and our perpetual sense of motion in which we attempt to gain entrance to the spirit.\(^{126}\) The spirit is a source of freedom and anxiety. The anxiety exists because a knowable sense of death and destruction exists within the process of gaining personal knowledge. The spirit contains all desires and possibilities from the lightest to the darkest.

*Pendulum* is similar to *Radius Inscriber* in that both works “quest” after something that is beyond the level of containment (the sacred) that is the underlying structure of their existence. Both works are searching for perfection. For the pendulum, the egg is heaven, a structural beauty that the humanized appendage tries to possess by touching the orb. The pendulum attempts to move into its core, for beneath the shell of the egg lays a golden seed. The pendulum attempts to return to its origin, to the spirit. How we perceive this origin is of paramount importance to how we exist as humans. The desire to incorporate the sacred within the profane is one of the basic compulsions of human existence infusing human actions from the drive to create social organizations for the

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understanding of life through medicine, psychoanalysis, and the like to the basic desires of amorous affection.
CHAPTER VIII

QUESTIONS OF ALCHEMY IN GOLDEN BATH, GOLD RUSH AND THE HYBRID

While Horn’s earlier works have exemplified certain important alchemical notions, they did not express the tenets of alchemical thought but rather the quest for alchemical expression. As a reflection of the sun’s illumination, gold is the material that expresses the highest level of alchemical expression as a reflection of the sun’s illumination.\(^\text{127}\) *Golden Bath* is a black square iron box that contains water sealed under a lid of brass and gold-plated crystal (See Fig. 17.). The lid of brass and gold-plated crystal gives the piece a gold light-infused amorphous presence that is highly vaporous in appearance. The gold-plated crystal has an inscription that gives the work the appearance of containing a sacred text. This text is that of Vasari’s “Life of Pontormo,” the story “of a baker’s son who impersonated the Golden Age in a masked procession ‘and died soon thereafter due to the hardship he suffered in order to earn ten scudi.’” As Katharina Schmidt observed, *Golden Bath* cries when the heat starts to rise (as condensation starts to occur).\(^\text{128}\)

Horn’s development of the concept of a self-contained object and ritual space in *Golden Bath* moves into the realm of a more complete alchemical concept. The eternal cosmic structure in *Golden Bath* is similar to *Paradise Widow*. But, in *Golden Bath*, a

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human presence no longer exists in direct association with the work. The piece is a larger informed reality that we come into contact with, something that can actualize our dreams if we let ourselves melt into it. *Golden Bath* depicts the materialization of the highest tenets of alchemy without expressing them in their complete material form.

**Gold** In Hindu doctrine... is the “mineral light.” According to Guenon, the Latin word for gold-aurum is the same as the Hebrew for light-aor. Jung quotes the delightful explanation offered by the alchemist Michael Maier in *De Circulo Physico Quadrato* to the effect that the sun, by virtue of millions of journeys round the earth has spun threads of gold all around it.\(^\text{129}\)

The sun represents a primarily male ideal, an eternal presence that casts the darkness of night into the clarity of day. “Gold is the image of solar light and hence of the divine intelligence. If the heart is the image of the sun in man, in the earth it is gold.”\(^\text{130}\) No material captures the power and remembrance of brilliance like gold. This sense of perfection and orderliness in gold is seen as the ultimate point of transformation in alchemy. Gold is a necessity due to the regulatory structures, physical or otherwise, that fix the mind in the ever-changing cosmos.

(In alchemy) Gold is symbolic of all that is superior, the glorified or ‘fourth state’ after the first three stages of black (standing for sin and penitence), white (remission and innocence) and red (sublimation and passion). Everything golden or made of gold tends to pass on this quality of superiority to its utilitarian function.\(^\text{131}\)

The four sides of the box and its black depths symbolize the four elements of material existence.\(^\text{132}\) According to alchemists, the fourth element is mercury and is the presence that can change the other three on the process to alchemic perfection. Mercury

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\(^{\text{131}}\)Ibid., 293-294.

\(^{\text{132}}\)Ibid., 293-294.
moves between the spirit of revelation and the *massa confusa* of the earth or the subconscious.\footnote{Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 144-145.} *Golden Bath* is indicative of a time of development when connections are made between the concrete and the psychic through the means of alchemy. The power of development in *Golden Bath* becomes a greater force as the subconscious manifests within the material, thereby transforming the latter. A sense of drama exists in the sun-drenched light of *Golden Bath*. Alchemy utilizes dramatic presence to excite the senses; otherwise, it could not create a system that encapsulates the elements of human existence. Behind the drama of human personification lies a powerful structure that is simultaneously perfect and malleable. Alchemy always exists in a state of essential forces in flux.

*Golden Bath* is a powerful example of not only a state of existence but also of a system of perception brought to existence. *Golden Bath* facilitates the power of the psyche and spirit, and, in the meeting of the two, the transformation of physical reality occurs. *Golden Bath* is one step closer to the possibility of a thought structure, a philosophy in motion. The words inscribed on *Golden Bath* are like the inscriptions on the fountain in the *Chymical Wedding*. The point of alchemical allegories and religious texts that they offer a point of reflection, something to contemplate on, that is the closest embodiment of a structured state of existence. The square of the bath is a larger subtext to physical reality that functions at an energy level that is the building block for all cosmic structures: the underlying net of energy that connects everything separated by various quantum states.
Therefore, *Golden Bath* represents a concept of perfection by its association with captured sunlight as a cosmic ideal of revelation towards enlightened thought. In the total alchemical process, there exists a movement from states of higher attainment back into the ashes. *Golden Bath* is akin to a cosmic reality that infuses the mind with a powerful mythic fantasy that is an actualization of perfection. *Golden Bath* represents the possibility of the human mind and spirit to be stripped of unnecessary struggle and chaos. This does not mean chaos, as a force of change, is discarded, but rather chaos is harnessed as a source parallel to the blackness (*massa confusa*) of the inner core of earth as a place of birth. The inner womb of the earth is a place where the confusing aspects of human existence unfold. The space of perfect containment in *Golden Bath* is something that cannot exist in a state of solidarity from time-to-time. The perfection must die to allow for new growth. While *Golden Bath* speaks of the alchemical quest for spiritual gold, the work also has a dark side to it, as Vasari’s text on the brass and gold-plated crystal displays. The story signifies the dark side of all spiritual endeavor. A type of perpetual life and death that never reaches an end but rather spirals outward. This process of perpetual movement from life to death occurs in the ritualistic action of *Gold Rush* (1985).

*Gold Rush* consists of a bar of gold suspended several feet from the floor (See Fig. 18.). Higher up and on the wall is positioned a mechanical apparatus in which a motorized hammer picks away at a piece of coal that dispenses dust to the bar of gold suspended below. *Gold Rush* is one of the works Horn created in the '80s in which materials such as sulfur, gold, charcoal, mercury, iron oxide, electricity, and animal materials act as metaphors for human interaction and existence. The disappearing gold symbolizes the
gold of spiritual knowledge with its momentary presence. The gold covered up by the
clear earth symbolizes a state of remission and convalescence. The death symbolized by
charcoal is parallel to the death of the King and the Queen in the *Chymical Wedding*.
Horn’s work entitled *The Hybrid* (1987) juxtaposes the dark and light of Gold Rush
through the presence of coal and sulfur; alchemically speaking sulfur is gold in an
unperfected state. *The Hybrid* does not exhibit the total nature of either *Gold Rush* or

*Hybrid* consists of two large transparent glass funnels that are about four feet in
height and about four feet in diameter (See Fig. 19.). They hang side by side, connected
to the ceiling by steel cables. Respectively, the funnels contain sulfur and coal. Sulfur is
an actual alchemical material, symbolic of alchemical gold in an unperfected state. Coal is
symbolic of the dark aspects of the unconscious. It is the core of the earth from which
sulfur emerges. Coal is also a feminine principle in its womb-like darkness and the way it
spills its contents.\(^{134}\) The pile of coal that lies beneath is a strange point of reflection and
speaks of the alchemical concept of seeing the self reflected in material objects. The piece
epitomizes the duality of human existence, focusing on materials and shapes that are dual
opposites. The two aspects of the human psyche symbolized by the masculine and the
feminine are given separate containment instead of existing in a state of interpenetration.
Human identity becomes assumed in geological materials that exist in a basic, undisturbed
state, a state of essence. Horn’s work has reached a crossroads in the reduction of the

human agent to its essential alchemical components. By drawing out the breadth of the human experience, alchemy allows for new life to emerge from the ashes. The soul is born anew like sulfur abstracted from coal.

*Hybrid* delves into the alchemical process through its focus on earth materials. Unlike Horn's early works like, *Peacock Machine*, which set the stage for this act of alchemical submersion, *Hybrid* metaphorically places the individual, symbolized by the funnel as a reflection of the human as spiritual and material hybrid, in direct contact with the earth from which everyone is born. The significance of this action is that once the core space of the psyche, is reached, then the process of assimilation can occur in which the transforming powers of the subconscious are more completely manifested within the self. By dealing with the mechanical and the spirit in works like *Peacock Machine*, Horn has opened a conceptual space that allows the subconscious a resting place within the material. While there is still conflict between the two, there is no longer a state of closure.

The fluid nature of the marriage of the material and spiritual within the subconscious allows for the fullest possibilities of transforming outer reality. This transformation occurs through the manifestation of spiritual energies in which a meeting occurs between the self and nature. The place where people's chaotic animalism, their *massa confusa*, finds fullest expression in erotic acts. It is here where human essence reveals itself. *Hybrid* is energy in waiting. It is the emergence from the deepest reaches of the psyche where coal symbolizes Hades, in which an ascension can occur that makes

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concrete one's deepest desires and fears. *Hybrid* reflects the union of opposites, the royal marriage so essential in alchemy.\(^{137}\)

The large amount of sulfur and coal gives the work a presence that is geological. Sulfur is a powerful alchemical material and symbol. Symbolically, it is one of the materials associated with the sun.\(^{138}\) Sulfur is closer to concentration and knowledge, as opposed to coal which is visually impenetrable and difficult for the eye to map. The coal released from its funnel is a mirror of the container. The shape of the pile of coal has associations with hidden forces with its likeness to that of a witch's hat. The funnel is a masculine and feminine symbol: masculine in its shape, which is horn-like, and feminine in the hollow containment that resembles a womb. The associative meaning of shapes and symbols is an important fact not only in alchemy, where the type of the alchemical vessel, among other things, signifies changes that occur on the interior or on the exterior. Shape also has effect on the human psyche in general. The shape, rhythm, and movement of the objects around us, and that also constitute our bodily structures, are powerful forms of identification and connection to the world around us. Shape plays an important role in body identification. Males generally find identity in phallus shapes and women in circular motifs, both of which have powerful psychological repercussions. While certain shapes are significant to both sexes, the meaning and influence of various shapes are not wholly particular to either sex due to the malleability of symbolic forms and the human personae.

From the realm of male and female duality in *Hybrid*, Horn expands her alchemical vision

in *Concert in Reverse* (1987) by encompassing historic realties and the spirit of place into her growing alchemical vision.
CHAPTER IX

SPIRIT AND PLACE: SPACES OF HUMAN INTERACTION IN

CONCERT IN REVERSE AND HYDRA FOREST, PERFORMING OSCAR WILDE

A culminating effect of the alchemical process of realization that has been building within the past chapters is Horn’s ability to use the knowledge she has gained and the tools she has created in a way that transforms the spaces she works within into an altered reality. This creation of altered realities allows her to employ the ideas and structures she has created and to use them as a type living system that allows for the materials and subsequently the spaces they exist within to speak volumes. Her works have the ability to manifest the presence of, and (or) transform, what they come into contact with, the result being a heightened sense of the dynamic forces of existence. *Concert in Reverse* (1987) manifests and employs alchemical tenets within a historical context to exemplify how an alchemical way of perceiving the spirit of places, times, and materials in a fashion that expresses essential qualities of existence such as the dichotomies of life and death and the human need for expression (See Fig. 20-22.).

*Concert in Reverse* employs a Piranesian in Münster, Germany a structure that was used as a prison and site of executions in both the Middle Ages and during W.W.II. The building is constructed of cylindrical walls that enclose dark cells illuminated only

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from openings in the central space. Horn employs votive candles set into the cells as a form of remembrance of the people who died there. She also intermittently dispersed mechanized metal hammers that tap at the masonry walls to echo or give life to the activities that occurred there in the past.\(^{140}\) She also placed an egg balanced between two metal rods that reflects the precariousness and frailties of human existence. One rod is joined to the floor and one hangs from the ceiling as a presence of impending danger.

Other elements of the work include a pair of snakes kept in a glass vitrine and fed mice. A water condensing-device is suspended above a pool of black liquid into which the water periodically drops. All the devices are part of Horn’s overall repertoire of images and mechanisms that she sometimes employs in the creation of her work. They function as a symbolic method or alchemical system that hammers away or distills the hidden presence of an environment. She also aestheticizes and makes allegorical expressions out of the materials she employs in a way that intermingles the various symbolic uses of these materials, such as gold or a hammer, with her own visions that are realized in an alchemical way to present a way of perceiving something. Alchemy offers a way of perceiving how things interrelate in a way that is simultaneously knowable and miraculous. Alchemy gives presence to the forces of the cosmos in a way that is controlled and unknowable simultaneously; therefore allowing the unknowable to become knowable because of alchemy’s ability to mimic the creative functions of the cosmos.

\(\text{Concert in Reverse}\) was an important work for several reasons. One reason is its

use of an actual historic site as the setting and basis of the work. This fact increases the level of symbolic association between the container of self explored in earlier works and the containers we exist within, how a space can reflect something of the human condition and spaces and objects can have a presence and life of their own. *Concert in Reverse* not only unearths the purposefully forgotten history of the prison by the government. It also gives the history of the space a voice by which to speak. The concept of space employed in works from the late ’70s flourished in the ’80s when Horn worked with Jounis Kounelis in 1986 on a project. Kounellis inspired Horn to explore the presence of spirit in a space as a separate living entity. In *Concert in Reverse*, Horn employed her growing repertoire of symbolic objects, materials, and processes as a type of alchemical system of interpretation, creating a psychic bridge from a historic reality to the viewers. The materials employed, while not particular just to alchemy, unearth deeply-seeded feelings about what occurred in that space in earlier times. Continual undertones of W.W.II pulsate between the surface and the depths of Germany’s psyche. *Concert in Reverse* created a controversy. This controversy mainly focused around the history of the building, that till the time of the installation, was largely ignored and even unknown to many of the locals. The following quotation from *Vogue* signifies this past:

> When she researched the history of the building, she found it had been used by the Gestapo during the war to execute Russian and Polish prisoners; four at a time were hanged in the central tower... In the years the tower had been neglected, airborne seeds had drifted into and sprouted there; Horn carefully preserved tokens of the renewal of life.

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Horn was not allowed to use the site at first. When she finally received permission, the resulting work provoked a response with the use of Münster mice to feed the snake because mice figure prominently in the folklore of the city. The inclusion of a historic occurrence and space in Horn’s work increases the level of symbolic and alchemical creations that can span space and time, as in a film. This process occurs through the increasing manifestation of spiritual energies because of the strong subconscious presence of her work. *Hydra Forest, Performing Oscar Wilde* (1988) conjures up the presence of Oscar Wilde in an environment that presents itself as perpetual alchemical séance in that the objects and mechanisms incorporated give a physical and metaphoric presence to Oscar Wilde through Horn’s presentation of what, for her, gives life to Oscar Wilde. The materials employed in the work create an environment in which strange things can occur in a stillness that explodes into passion.

*Hydra Forest* is composed of sealed glass funnels filled with mercury that were fitted into the floor (See Fig. 23.). Also, a pair of men’s black shoes filled with coal floats on a pile of coal. Numerous pairs of symbolic copper snakes are suspended from the ceiling by small electrical generators that send electricity through them. Electricity shoots out between the paired snakes through metal antennae that emerge from each of them. Each of the six funnels, except for one, is of the same size, and they are all in a row. In the place where another funnel would sit, a pair of men’s black shoes hover on top of a pile of coal. Horn herself describes the piece in the following way:

Rebecca Horn: *The Hydra Forest*, 1988

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The fourteen-headed hydra electrically charged hanging dangerously in the room spewing out sizzingly destructive kisses searing, carbonizing electrifying between the serpent heads Squeezing the brain cells together freezing the moisture in the throat shaking around the magnetic fields in the body almost to disintegrate under the full four hundred sixty thousand volts Weighted down with Pittsburgh's coal Oscar Wilde's last pair of shoes levitating nevertheless to float with new energy back into space.  

The copper snakes periodically come to life, sometimes in small flashes, other times, a chain reaction occurs. At other times, large electrical current surge through that creates a spectacle in a piece that is otherwise non-motion oriented. The electricity transfixes people. Sometimes, the snakes shoot out white or blue kisses and they bang around clumsily. The kiss reflects the type of life passion exemplified in Oscar Wilde, literary dandy who aesthetized and romanticized life's pleasures of an aristocratic existence that precariously hovered above society's moral codes. Eventually, his pleasures transgressed social norms, and he was trapped within the prison of a socially prescribed vision of obedience.

The kiss, a central theme of the artist's most recent objects, sets off an exclusive release of pent-up energies...the hissing snakes' kisses in *The Hydra Forest, Performing Oscar Wilde* (1988): 'She knows that the intensity of love-so vital to her-is fading and will never be repeated.' In this 'intensity of love,' the nakedness and fragility, sensitivity and trickiness of human existence finds its only real, albeit fleeting chance.  

The sparks practically ignite people's minds through which a new opening occurs. When people ponder on the work, their minds start to create a number of associations. People sometimes created stories around the piece; one person even told their child that the ghost of the person who wore the black shoes lives within the space. The ghost of Oscar Wilde lingers in an environment that is infused with the danger of electricity. This sense of danger is also exemplified in the copper snakes (hydros). The hydra is a creature filled with dangerous potentiality. It is something that wrap can itself around its prey creating an organic prison. The hydra in Greek mythology is a multiheaded monster, a water-serpent that ravaged the country of Argos. It grew two heads for every one severed. Hercules killed the Hydra, burned off the heads and used its gall to make poisoned arrows.\textsuperscript{145} The dangerous power of the hydra's poison in a redefined context can have positive ends. Hercules used the poison to his own ends. Within Hydra Forest, the dangerous forces that brought on Oscar Wilde’s fall are now used for his resurrection.

The danger of personal transformation is a prison that can not be avoided, although as a prison it can become a womb of transformation or a place of torture. The East German writer Heiner Müller's \textit{Herakles the Hydra} inspired Hydra Forest.\textsuperscript{146} The story is about how “a man lost in a forest comes to realize that his predicament is akin to being engulfed by an encompassing body.”\textsuperscript{147} This story and the presence of the work creates a prison or womb like experience that vacillates between dread of annihilation and

\textsuperscript{146}Lynne Cooke, “Rebecca Horn Missing Full Moon,” \textit{Flash Art} 26 (November/December 1993): 75.
\textsuperscript{147}Ibid.
creation. The coals around and in the shoes have replaced Oscar Wilde, who is reduced to
the black matter. A dark transformation has occurred between the charcoal and the
electricity, by which Oscar Wilde finds perpetual rebirth in the energies that pass between
the mercury and the coal. Mercury is the intermediary between realities as a messenger of
the gods that has parallel significance within Egyptian religion within the form of Thoth,
the god of knowledge who writes down everything known. Mercury is the god who exists
as an intermediary principle that manifests spiritual knowledge.148

Mercury is associated with Hermes-ancient Roman god of commerce and messenger of
the gods; probably for the comparison of the mobility of the metal to traditional fleet
footedness of the god... Mercury and the Egyptian god Thoth have parallel meaning.
"Hermetic-Hermes Trismegistus-Thoth-The Egyptian god of wisdom, fabled author of
a number of mystical, philosophical, and alchemistic writings...hermeneutics-the study
of the methodological principles of interpretation and explanation.149

Individuals require the power of mercury. Mercury has the capacity to cross the
boundaries that exist between the ego and the forces of personal change locked in the
psyche, connected to the cosmos-spirit. Mercury functions as a mirror because individuals
cannot reach their full knowledge within themselves. This process of change has to
happen through the fluctuating mirror of our connection to another, be that symbolically
or physically. Individuals can never fully experience themselves in personal isolation. The
gaps between the ego-contained self and the psyche are bridged through reflection. This
process occurs when individuals seek completion in the actions of their daily life where
they engage in activities that reflect the missing or hidden aspects of their personality. A
quotation from Lynne Cooke exemplifies the totality of this act of submersion.

(coal) not only betokens a state of prima materia, but carries an allusion to negredo, the first stage in a series of alchemical transformations of matter that end in its regeneration in the desired material of the philosopher's stone...pressurized energy and electric charge of the Hydra Forest suggest an instantaneous consumption. And while allusion is made...to the primal act of "regressus ad uterum," Horn likens the ambiance of the...installation to a "womb in a metal cage"...key metals and ores including mercury, copper, and carbon are present as catalysts. All have been brought together to effect a play of opposites of interior and exterior, the mechanical and organic, male and female, active and passive.

While Oscar Wilde was a victim of a society that could not accept his artistic vision and personal lifestyle, his artistic power outlived his social confinements. Tumultuous occurrences happen before some spiritual events, like the spark of electricity that runs through several of Horn's works. Electricity is a force that people harness to keep their machines and cities alive. Electricity is something amorphous in character, an underlying force useable only when harnessed in small amounts. The electricity of the piece symbolically infuses the space between the sky and earth with the presence of Oscar Wilde. The electricity represents, among other things, danger, destruction, and the power of the sublime to ignite the imagination, and create the aura of an otherworldly presence.

Horn's works are deeply immersed in and influenced by the physicality of the materials she employs her works remain grounded in material reality. The physical is the mirror in which everything else expresses itself. Hydra Forest is significant in Horn's oeuvre not only because it furthers the use of alchemical materials. It also physically and conceptually embodies the alchemical process of inner transformation. A transformation initiated by the energy of spirit in the electricity that moves to the blackness of the

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subconscious and inner spirit not yet unearthed from the coal. The spirit within coal uses the mercury as a cosmic messenger between itself and the other levels of reality.

*Hydra Forest* gives exciting life-presence to subconscious action in materials like electricity, which has an incredible physical presence that cannot be denied. The repertoire of Horn’s paradoxically simplistic materials with all their meaning of physical presence carry out complex symbolic associations. Upon reflection, the materials have a dual function as they are incorporated in a myriad of combinations and in a variety of places. Horn’s materials, because of their air of simplicity, are able to take on various new meanings on top of their own. The reason for this is that Horn creates living symbols that reveal a process of understanding instead of a preconceived central meaning. The importance of this process is that the level of association between self and surroundings is proliferated. *Hydra Forest* exemplifies Horn’s creation of an alchemical system of thought as a total life experience that has precedents in historical individuals who embody a state of existence in which the creative spirit of transformation defies cultural norms to express the true nature of the spirit. The piece reflects a total functioning alchemical reality that mixes and conflicts with Western ideals in a way that enacts a state of alchemical transformation and interconnection. This occurs through the revelation of spirit by the actual change and manifestation of a new presence and not just the combination of conflicting systems in the state of a single expression. The spaces of remembrance and transformation created in *Concert in Reverse* and *Hydra Forest* exists as alchemically inspired realities that offer glimpses into an existence where the sacred and the profane intermingle. The spaces created in these works allow for a dialogue to occur between the
audience and the presences evoked in a way that blurs the line between contemplation and active participation therefore subsuming the observer into Horn's alchemically inspired vision. Space is therefore presented as a creatively charged arena for personal, social, and spiritual exchanges.
CHAPTER X

ARTISTIC CREATION, SPIRIT, AND EROTICISM IN

BRUSH WINGS AND LES AMANTS

Creation is something that occurs in a constant process on a continuum with destruction. Art, in an expanded state of action, helps to control the chaos of life and aids in the knowledge and expression of self as a type of communication. Within her work, Rebecca Horn explores art as a ritually creative principle akin to the act of childbirth. The symbolism behind this statement is that, for Horn, art has the potentiality to give birth not only to inner desires but also to the possibility of growth through the melting down of closed ideas. The process of dissolution or melting of closed realities lies at the heart of the erotic symbolic action between the masculine and the feminine or the diverse poles of human thought and action. Erotic acts call for the transgression of polite behavior if the action is to be anything but mechanical. The very action of creation dwells in the heart of the works explored in this chapter such as Brush Wings (1988).

The action of creation that is explored in Brush Wings exemplifies how the creative process that is at the heart of alchemy, that is symbolized by the mercurial movement of the paint brush wings, is a physical enactment of the flight from the chaos of the dark inner earth to expanse of the sky. Brush Wings symbolizes an assent to freedom in which the artist has become an alchemical practitioner whose creative actions have the ability to create realities unto themselves. The exploration of the levels of life with its
many realities has advanced in Horn’s works from the mid eighties onward to a stage in which Horn has assumed the powers of the materials she uses and transferred to her work instead of letting the materials interact in a way that express their essence and their magical and symbolic properties. Horn is now directing her creative energies in directions that can transform the environment and realities around her in ways that embrace a full range of experiences, and in doing so the dangerous elements of transformation experienced in some of her earlier works is taken to a level in which the collision and dissolution of the barriers setup within Western society are taken on in a total and perpetual way. Brush Wings expresses the creation of a bird machine whose wings are paint brushes (See Fig. 24.). A series of paint brushes situated in the shape of a bird’s wing periodically move up and down in a simulation mimicking flight. The symbolic presence of a bird equals flight and psychic freedom. The act of creation is taken into the realm of rhythm, fantasy, and ritual. Creation is an action that moves beyond the confines of the studio into an open space where it is perceivable to a wider audience. “Every winged being is symbolic of spiritualization. The bird according to Jung, is a beneficent animal representing spirits or angels, supernatural aid, thoughts and flights of fancy.” Brush Wings is similar to the magic machines that infuse the viewer with amazement in the Chymical Wedding. Flight and art are points of initiation into the psyche, invoking the thought of another place and the movement through the space of sky where clouds and sky-blue give the psychic expression of release. Birds play a

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predominant part in alchemical symbolism.\textsuperscript{153} Birds either exist in freedom or in a cage. Horn states when a bird dies its skin (feathers) remains; something is always left over that is symbolic of the residual nature of the spirit. The presence of the bird speaks of not only the physical cage of material existence but also the larger cage of the cosmos-spirit or psyche.

The bird may also stand for the metamorphosis of a lover....In alchemy, birds stand for forces in process of activation, here the precise sense is determined by the location of the bird, soaring skywards it expresses volatilization or submersion, swooping earthwards precipitation and condensation, these two symbolic movements joined to form a single figure are expressive of distillation....the volatile as opposed to the fixed. Birds are infused with spirit and depending on type and color.\textsuperscript{154}

Black birds are spirit in descension. Migration is part of the nature and life cycle of many birds, a process that is a seasonal life and death journey fraught with perpetual movement and searching. The volatilization of birds in ascension is also symbolic of the erotic. The impetus of the artistic act is beautifully represented in \textit{Brush Wings}. \textit{Brush Wings} is an important symbolic object because of its literal connection between artistic creation and the spiritual form of the bird. Birds move between the sun, moon, and earth. Not totally spirit, they are spirit infused matter. The act of artistic creation that was addressed in \textit{Brush Wings} also occurs in Horn’s painting-machines from around the same time, although to a somewhat different degree. \textit{Brush Wings} is a metaphorical painting-machine, and \textit{Les Amants} (1990) is a literal painting-machine.

\textit{Les Amants}, as a painting-machine, is something recurrent in Horn’s \textit{oeuvre}. \textit{Les Amants}, constructed of two glass funnels attached to the wall, feeds the separated

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champagne and black ink from the two funnels into a painting arm that splatters them across the wall (See Fig. 25.). The end result is both an abstract painting and the aftermath of a battle.

The two forces represented by the two funnels are that of the masculine and the feminine that express the total level of interaction between all aspects of life. In alchemy, the masculine and feminine represent the basic powers of creation within the universe that are embodied in the concepts of perpetual spiritual existence, the immutable part of existence, and the act of perpetual change between life and death that shapes the very nature of the universe and puts the immutable part of the spirit into action. While the two aspects perpetually clash, they must come together for renewal and growth to occur. The masculine and the feminine both come together through the charged forces of alcohol and the dark presence of unknown desires of the black ink as an allusion to sexual desire. All Horn’s painting-machines make allusions to Duchamp’s *Large Glass* (1915-1923), which speaks of the possible union of the masculine and the feminine in a physical and symbolic way. The male and the female are more than physical individuals for both Horn and Duchamp. They are symbolic objects charged with wants and desires representing the mystical union of the masculine and feminine energies in all of us. In Duchamp’s case, they represent movement to a higher, fourth-dimensional level of existence. For Horn, they represent an encapsulation of the spirit as the feminine, a form of the sacred and the profane. Duchamp, who was a crossdresser, thought that the male was stuck in the

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mechanics of mundane reality. Horn views the unification of the masculine and the feminine as a completion of an ideal. Duchamp worked with concepts that have parallel affinities to alchemical processes in works like the Large Glass that envisions the possible union of the masculine and feminine that has not yet occurred (See Fig. 26.). Horn offers a glimpse of the two merging together revealed in the actions of her painting-machines as well as several of her other works.

The feminine in Horn’s painting-machines is the sought-after place of redemption in which the masculine painting machine wants to merge with through the dance of the paint. In some cases, the dance becomes a source of consumption for the male, physically and symbolically, like the feminine void of Paradise Widow. Because of the power of erotic attraction coupled with the fear of personal loss, a wrestling and splattering effect results in which allure and defensiveness come crashing together. The work speaks of the struggle of the masculine and feminine (anima and animus) and that between the material and physical. The action of union symbolically and physically accessed through the psychic mediator of drink as a Bacchanal and Dionysian force of openness and liquification. Horn explores the act of questioning that occurs in abstract expressionism as a whole. A sense of absurd action also occurs in the work in which the action of action painting becomes a mechanical process. A type of subconscious writing occurs in the abstract expressionism epitomized by Jackson Pollock. A psychic writing that is highly process oriented, it is the process of exposure and creation that is at the heart of Les

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Amants. Both *Les Amants* and *Brush Wings* are examples of the creative and transformative aspects of the alchemical process subsumed by the artist as mystical creator in which the process of alchemical transformation is manifested in such a way that the process of change is an entity unto itself.
CHAPTER XI

SPIRIT OF TRANSFORMATION IN
HIGH MOON AND RIVER OF THE MOON

The process of change in alchemy encapsulates the ability to tap into energies that are volatile in nature. The energies unleashed within the alchemical process of transformation offer a momentary glimpse of something that exists beyond the confines of the self. This unleashed knowledge and personal energy needs to be harnessed and actualized before they can be used as a further catalyst of growth to yet other realms of realization on the movement to the Philosopher’s Stone. Change itself needs an environment within which to occur. Tensions have to occur and personal antennae or body extensions of some sort must be raised if the lightening of change is to be attracted.

Two of Horn’s installations from the nineties, High Moon (1992), and River of the Moon High Moon (1992) both in their subsequent ways create such an environment. Both installations are infused with Horn’s own personal desires and quests that harness change within her agenda of personal and social expansion through awakening the fullest capacities of self expression. The personal aspects of these two works lead back to the initial realm of all alchemical actions, the self, and so Horn’s work spirals back to its origins. Keeping in mind that this larger spiraling or cyclical action of Horn’s oeuvre from the personal to the personal is a general movement that encapsulates further spirals that have been placed into a linear pattern within my analysis of her work.
Horn's work from the nineties envisions a total alchemical presence in that the alchemical actions of transformation and interaction between levels of existence occur on a grand and perpetual scale. The work symbolizes and embodies the power of alchemical transformation in a large scale social way. The changes that Rebecca Horn experienced through the growth of her work are an expansion of her personal boundaries and the Western belief systems she exists within are now experienced in a way in which the transformation of self has been more fully turned to a transformation of environment. Environmental changes through the active participation of the audience via Horn's work has been a basic element of her work from the beginning. Although this is typically the case, the earlier works, while expressing alchemical tenets and elements were part of a larger transformation, a transformation that ran its scope in the eighties and developed into the creation of works that more encapsulated the totality of development in Horn's work from the beginning. *High Moon* and subsequent works from the late '80s and the '90s have taken the motifs and developments of earlier works to the level of a total alchemical experience. The alchemical nature of the experience created is present in earlier works in a more symbolic way, yet the literalness of *High Moon* expresses alchemical processes by physically connecting the various facets of not only sensory presence but also the symbolic presence of the sky (ceiling area) and the earth (the floor) along with other facets of existence and transforms them into a type of metaphysical battleground where reality is played out.

*High Moon* is a highly participatory work in that it not only greets the audience with the sound of machine gun fire, but there are also two rifles suspended from the
ceiling (See Fig. 27.). Periodically, the guns swing into action. The guns are attached to mechanical arms that move around. Plastic tubing attached to two half-moon or breast-shaped funnels suspended from the ceiling are filled with red liquid that shoots from the guns periodically. An electrical device is attached to one of the funnels, infusing it with energy. Horn’s own writing on the piece reveals its dark and violent undercurrents:

Rebecca Horn: *High Moon*, New York, 1991

From the deepest part of the ocean
and the brightest part of the sun
collected in a pair of identical moon funnels
the full blown energy of two distinct creatures
dancing about in abandon
suddenly face to face with each other
generating up to their maximum voltage
to meet for a second of equal eternity
opening their pores and unleashing their blood streams
accelerating each other to the point of near-bursting
screaming like moon dogs in lost icy nights
when the arrow of Venus taps lightly the funnel
unleashing the tandem explosion of energies
transforming the creatures into illuminated fusion
not missing a drop of each other’s volcanic residue
flowingly forming a river of passion
burrowing its way back to the restless ocean
bathed in the Moon.
The little fox nudges the moon funnels with his snout
prompting the circulation of the blood inside.
The Winchesters slowly turn toward each other,
fix their sights and aim.
For seconds, no one dares to breathe.
The simultaneously fired shots vulcanize the bodies,
they fade away,
transmitting signs to the bottom of the sea.
The river of blood cuts its bed with a chainsaw,
running straight across Manhattan to the ocean.

The guns are possessed by a lustful drive of their own and are driven by a cosmic blood liquor that comes from the sky itself. "High Moon is a particular version of Horn's ink machines, one in which blood is a red ink, making its mark on the museum's wall. This is a love machine that writes with blood/ink, a bride machine that writes not only on, but with the body." High Moon has similarities to Duchamp's Large Glass (1915-23).

Large Glass is termed a bachelor machine. This reading of the work is accurate because Duchamp employed mechanical images (the chocolate grinder) to denote the male presence as a bachelor, someone who grinds his own chocolate, but yearns for something more. Difficulty arises in that for Duchamp, men in his time, and this still seems apropos today, are overly mechanized, yet they yearn for release-paradise. Symbolically speaking, the feminine represents this personal self-expansion as a type of alchemcial virgin. The mechanical male presence below tries to project itself into the amorphous cloud of femininity that is suspended in the upper panel of the work. Duchamp himself partook of a particular ritual in which he shot matches at the feminine section in an attempt to connect the masculine and the feminine; none of the tries succeeded. The mechanical male exists in a context embodied in the following passage: "Carrougees defined the bachelor machine as a psychological phenomenon, a mechanomorphized that equally reflects emancipatory potential of contemporary culture and its potential horrors..."; Duchamp envisioned the male stuck in the realm of culture and woman as above culture.

Specifically referring to the lower part of Marcel Duchamp's...the Large Glass, the
bachelor machines designates an aesthetics of machines that inscribes the body in its
relation to sexuality, the social text, psychological typographies, forms of
authority, and the workings of history. The myth of the bachelor machine informs
cultural production through the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a
theatrical, imaginary machine, a “fantastic image that transforms love into a
technique of death.”

Horn expands Duchamp’s formula in that she gives more hope to the possibility of the
merging of opposites in an alchemical wedding of the male-female, or anima-animus as
Jung terms them, that exists within all of us. The marriage of volatile and fixed spiritual
energies is the story line behind a favorite alchemical story of Horn’s The Chymical
Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz. The fact that Horn wants to create a state of union
between opposing forces, no matter how precarious and dangerous this may be, is
exemplified in how throughout her career she creates works that are highly theatrical and
charged with a presence that turns the audience into a participant in her work so as to melt
the barriers between art, life, individual action, and participation.

The audience participates on many levels of sensory and emotional involvement.
The level of involvement ranges from the sound of gun fire to the threat of being shot by
the guns as they go through their exotic and erotic dance. The dance is filled with
anticipation and danger in that periodically the two guns might meet up and merge in the
liquids they dispense, which are red, or lash out at the audience. The red is symbolic of
sexual union in blood and battle. Also in alchemy, red is symbolic of the final process
before unification. A trough of red cuts through the room running beneath the guns.

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Attached to the end of the trough is a saw that cuts into the wall. The guns also cover the floor with red, thus expanding the action of the work to incorporate fully the space around it. The uses of the moon and mercury, which are symbolic of change, movement, and volatility in and outside of alchemy are symbols that are a recurrent and predominant elements in Horn’s current work.

The moon is a powerful alchemical symbol that denotes subconscious desires, fertility, and life movement through disintegration; the moon affects material reality from the tides of the ocean to woman’s menstrual cycles (an embodiment of blood and possible fertilization). Horn’s increasing use of the moon follows her increasing focus that dissolves the differences between spaces and levels of reality. Horn’s increasing use of the moon follows her increasing focus that dissolves the differences between spaces and levels of reality. High Moon incorporates many alchemical facets such as the symbol of the moon and the confluence of organic and material motion in the guns. Also the fact that the guns move with a life force of their own that, as Horn herself explains, comes from the collected energy of the ocean and the sun funneled through the moon. The fires of the sun and water of the ocean as opposing forces are brought together in the mercurial nature of the moon. This merger occurs in a process of distillation that is able to shift from lightness to darkness in the blink of an eye. The process of distillation that occurs in High Moon finds a parallel process in the following passage from the Chymical Wedding:

In these vestries we were distributed, there to pray for the life of the King and Queen. Mean while the Virgin went in and out of the little door a, till we had done. For as soon as our process was absolved, there was brought in, and placed in the middle through the little door, by twelve persons...a wonderful thing of a longish shape, which

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my companions took only to be a fountain. But I well observed that the corps's lay in it, for the inner chest was of an oval figure, so large that six persons might well lie in it one by another. Hereupon the Virgin opened the casket, in which there was a round thing wrapped up in a piece of green double taffeta. This she laid in the uppermost kettle, and then covered it with the lid, which was full of holes, and had besides a rim, on which she poured in some of the water which we had the day before prepared, whence the fountain began immediately to run, and through four small pipes to drive into the little kettle. Beneath the undermost kettle there were many sharp points, on which the Virgins stuck their lamps, that so the heat might come to the kettle, and make the water seeth. Now the water beginning to simper, by many little holes at a, it fell in upon the bodies, and was so hot, that it dissolved them all, and turned them into liquor.

The distillation process that infuses Horn's erotically driven machine enacts the inverse of the process of the usual utilitarian machine in Western culture. To enable itself to function, the mechanical had to pull away from its occult and human beginnings. These beginnings existed in religion, as exemplified by the proto-scientific aspect of alchemy to become something autonomous, a closed system. Mechanical reality also became a way of ordering existence something which sprang from the urge to perpetually create, in our drive to find a cleaner union with nature. The mechanical has become a dividing force and the predominant reality of Western thought. In Horn's work, the machines infused with human compulsions and desires attempt to move back to the spirit from which the impulse of mechanism was born. Born from this longing, Horn's machines have the desire to return to this lost state, and in the process of their quest, they short-circuit their utilitarian function. In *High Moon*, the symbolism of the circular-saw, the mechanistic presence, is in a perpetual search for its separated organic and occult beginnings. The mechanical is now itself drenched in the blood of the erotic and causing its own tragic demise. The saw

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desires return to that which it must run from by tearing at the confines of its own existence. *High Moon* symbolizes a type of death-wish that is a recurring motif in Horn’s films and sculptural works. The lunar presence of *High Moon* continued in *Horn’s River of the Moon* (1992) in which mercury is the fuel for a magical machine of transformation.

*River of the Moon* explores the spiritual presence of a space in a way that unearths what Horn perceives to be the essence or character of a place (See Fig. 28.). Horn frequently exhibits in environments that are cellars or dark underbellies of buildings. The original showing of the work included a second part of the exhibition called *Hotel Peninsular*. Horn employs pumping machines, drilling machines, lead pipes, and black boxes containing mercury to expand the inner confines of human creation and life’s perpetual change that the machines harness so as to make less volatile. The process of transformation cannot occur in its full capacity because that would dissolve the necessary boundaries of human existence. Rather, the machines offer a relegated form of harnessing the energy. Alchemy offers an excellent framework for the activity of tapping into and harnessing spiritual energies in that alchemy exists within the scientific and spiritual simultaneously and thus merges the various veins of Western thought.¹⁶⁷

The factory space of the original installation is continued beyond the architectural constraints as pumping machines, moving at separate rhythms, pump mercury through lead piping that lays on the floor like a mass of snakes connected to drilling machines that pierce and open up the walls of the building. The snake is a universal symbol that in

Alchemy is a symbol of mercury. The snake also symbolizes the earth, so the mercury is transforming the dark matter of the earth (the lead) which in alchemy denotes heaviness and the weight of the inner darkness of the earth, the initial material in the alchemic process and the element that must be transformed for the self to be freed. The mercury slithers through the black boxes, making slurping noises as it moves from one end to another and into a hole to slide around the floor and through the building. The following passage recreates the presence of the work in one installation. *River of the Moon* (at the Guggenheim Museum):

...consisted of a large ominous-looking zinc-colored generator box fixed to the wall, its surface fitted with levers and crowned by glass funnels with copper-colored powder. Every few minutes the mechanism jolted into action, emitting a dull rasp as its levers began to move. A cluster of lead tubes sprouted from the top of the generators control unit, snaked across the museum floor and appeared to tunnel directly into the walls of the nearby bays. Similar tubes then emerged through the floors of all three ramps above, some ending in glass covered black boxes containing pools of trembling mercury, others in glass funnels half-filled with the crystallized residue of an aquamarine liquid.  

Nature itself is symbolized by the metaphor of the river of mercury coursing through the space, which returns to an unseen ocean. The presence of these subconscious machines transforms the spaces they inhabit into living systems. The pipes create a circulatory system that in a grand act of expansion of a life force which imbues all levels of existence with an animistic force. Horn’s own writing on the piece poetically presents the construction and nature of her spirit machine:

Rebecca Horn: *El Rio De La Luna*, Barcelona, 1992

In a high ceilinged room of an old hat factory, the grey floor is cracked like old elephant skin. Mercury flashes branch over it like veins, and follow the cracks.

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gleaming. These flashes of lightning drill through the outer-wall liquifying in light towards the sea, forming a river that flows from darkness to light.

The river of the moon.

The liquid mercury moonlight is pumped through lead veins, collected and re-charged, then branches out through transparent glass tubes transporting the mercury through the pump-stations of the seven heart chambers. The mercury pulses in different rhythms and thus flows throughout the room.

There is a key for every heart chamber, which corresponds to each one of the seven rooms in the Hotel Peninsular. By entering the rooms, the journey deep within the body begins.

Found in a market in Barcelona, a miniature Borsalina, the hat as an upside-down bed for the brain.

In Horn’s River of the Moon, mercury virtually has a life of its own. The mercury snakes around just as in an early work entitled Snake Piano, 1988, that is a longer, self-contained version of the pumping stations employed in River of the Moon. Another difference between Snake Piano and River of the Moon is the inclusion of a drilling machine that opens the confinement of the space. In doing so, the work moves the action outside the museum on a return trip to the ocean, therefore creating a living presence that is more disconcerting than High Moon. The action of River of the Moon is more complete in its melting of opposites through the physical denial of the very architectural space within which it exists. River of the Moon is also a self-contained fountain with its circulation of mercury as a primal water. Fountains are also the founts of the world’s rivers, the center of earthly existence and therefore the subconscious’ clearest link to the spiritual. The beginning and ending of all things on earth and are other recurring themes in Horn’s work.

The fountain represents primal matter, birth and disintegration. The primeval waters of the fountain also represent eroticism, which is freedom. The erotic

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encompasses fear and release. Release is parallel to ecstasy, but it also means relinquishing control. Since freedom through ecstasy gives release to the body and the psyche, it is of central importance in alchemy as an element of release and fulfillment. Oneness momentarily occurs back when death and life reemerge in the presence of liquid motion and exchange of body fluids.

In the original installation, the parallel exhibition of Hotel Peninsular created a further level of expansion. The use of a hotel places focus on the personal interaction that takes place in a hotel as a place that facilitates such action due to the kind of amorous, and otherwise colorful activities that hotels sometimes contain. Formally, the hotel was a nun's habitat and a bordello. The hotel is also representative of Barcelona, a place where Horn studied and had an intense affair.\footnote{Edmund White, "Horn of Plenty," Vogue 183 (June 1993), 184-185.} Hotel Peninsular consists of seven rooms with each room given a separate presence through its name and materials employed. The rooms are: Room of the Earth, Room of Water, Room of the Circle, Room of Lovers, Room of Mutual Destruction, Room of Air and Room of Fire. Room of the Earth is a small triangular room with a triangular bed attached to the wall, a wash sink and a pair of black men’s shoes that "constantly trembled in the middle of the floor."\footnote{Ibid., 184.} The room also includes a small light attached to a long metal cable suspended from the ceiling (See Fig. 29.) The whole room has a grounded presence, and the black shoes create a small void or entrance into the ground. Room of the Water is a small unassuming room with an armoire and a bed suspended from the ceiling (See Fig. 30.). The bed has tubing connected to it
that runs to the floor into five interconnected funnel-like containers that collect the liquid. The bed is part of a distillation machine in which the energies from the bed, that have achieved supernatural powers, coalesces and collects in the containers. The formal structure of the bed is also reminiscent of the sentencing machine in Kafka’s *Penal Colony* in which the criminal is strapped to a bed that inscribes their sentence on them till they die. The entire process is pictured as being tortuous and then pleasurable in its final release. This dichotomy between danger and even torture and release find various expression in Horn’s *oeuvre*. *Room of the Circle* contained a bed from which a metal pole protruded that had an arm attached (See Fig. 31.). The arm functioned as a radius inscriber that scratched at the walls of the room. Horn herself has described the arm as an instrument that marks off one’s personal space. This personal space is a place from which the individual takes the energy exhibited in the other rooms pulling into the body in a process of death and resurrection. *Room of Lovers* has nine mechanized violins placed on and around the bed as well as up the side of one wall (See Fig. 32.). The violins periodically come to life in an act of noise ridden rapture in which they scream. *Room of Mutual Destruction* contains two mechanized pistols, one of which is attached to a metal arm in front of mirror (See Fig. 33.). The guns move around as if seeking someone out, firing shots, in an erotic act that recalls the motions of *High Moon* but to a lesser degree. *Room of Air* contains a lavatory in which two mechanized fans decked out with flamingo feathers plays out a little dance representing presentation and preparation for attraction.

before the two began touching (See Fig. 34.). *Room of Fire* (See Fig. 35.) contains a device that consists of glass tubing in which flashes of “illumination shot up glass tubes that ran out the windows toward the sky.”¹⁷⁴ *Hotel Peninsular* is a space that Horn equates with the body. “An architectural site, the room is constructed and read, as a body. The walls have, or rather are, anatomical textures....Space emerges as gendered: a female inner topos, somewhere between the womb and the marsupium, a fluid geography of innersubjectivity.”¹⁷⁵ While the room is a feminine space as a womb of creation, it also contains male connotations in the materials employed—-from guns to the radius inscriber in *Hotel Peninsular*. The room is not completely a feminine space, rather it is a primarily feminine space that has a mercurial quality as a gender hybrid. If this is not the case, then the room is a closed environment that offers no chance of change.

Horn transformed several rooms in the hotel to tell a story of personal transformation. The story of an individual who moved from self-containment or concentration. Through love and danger, the individual transforms into someone who infused with new beguiling energies, plunging into the depth of the psyche. *River of the Moon* and *Hotel Peninsular* personify alchemical processes of distillation and resurrection in the symbol of the phoenix.¹⁷⁶ This process merges with real life experiences and life spaces that go beyond museums and galleries, such as hotels, factories, and sanitariums. Horn exemplifies how personal inner-reality expresses and creates itself in outer motion.

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She demonstrates how we create mental visions to express psychic realities that go beyond the fantastic into everyday life. During the process, the subtleties of the spirit reveal themselves, and the space of differentiation between the psyche and material reality weakens. Space becomes something malleable and relative not definite. Horn's work also demonstrates how the relationship between life-actions and space creates an altered reality. *Hotel Peninsular* along with *River of the Moon*, which in this particular installation in Barcelona was exhibited in a hat factory, created visions of how physical dark-matter comes into contact with the spirit. The work created an all-consuming demarcated space of who we are. It undermined the mass production of identity. The piece created an escape route because without an escape route we become lost in our fictions. A type of spiritual and conceptual escape route exists in how some Native Americans (the Navajo) leave a flaw or opening (Spirit Trail) in their creations. The reason for this is so that there can exist a continuous flow between all aspects of reality, so that no reality becomes all consuming.\(^{177}\) In Navajo religion, there exists the entity of the Spider Woman as a cosmic weaver of a holistic and ordered reality that brings together the totality of life. The Spider Woman leaves a flaw or opening in her creations so that it is not a closed reality but rather one open to change and transformation.\(^{178}\) Within a particular Navajo mythological story, the Spider Woman creates a space from which the gods emerge.\(^{179}\)

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\(^{178}\)Kate Peck Kent, "Navajo Weaving: Three Centuries of Change* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press), 90.

The transformation of entire gallery spaces occurs in works such as *River of the Moon*. *River of the Moon* is indicative of works from the '80s and '90s that have moved outdoors to incorporate the realm of nature itself as metaphor and example of change in its ultimate form as the force behind alchemical visions. An excellent example of this change is reflected in works like *The Bath of Reflected Dew Drops* (1985). The piece consists of a mirrored hexagonal condenser centrally located in a circle within a field. The piece was part of an exhibition in France (See Fig. 36.). The circle containing the condenser has parallel connotations to crop circles in its size, austerity, and mechanical consistency. As the demarcation between psychic space and material existence has lessened in her work, Horn increasingly focuses on creating spaces of circulation between self and cosmos. In these works, the forces of nature became metaphors for subconscious and spiritual actions. Through her works, she creates places where psychic desires return to their home. Materials melt into living metaphors. The very grounds we walk on and the spaces we move within transform into a living conceptual space. Horn's alchemical machines and environments, such as *High Moon* and *River of the Moon*, create an alchemical environment of interaction and transformation in which not only the manifestation of alchemical ideas has occurred but in which the alchemical ideas have actively transformed the space they exist within. They do so in a way that blurs the lines of distinction between the alchemical transformation on a mental level or a sensory level to a level of brute interaction that was established in some late eighties works to a level in which the audience is in a direct line of fire to the process of transformation literally occurring in *High Moon*. 
CHAPTER XII

INSPIRATION FOR CHANGE:

BUSTER KEATON AND TRAPPING THE MUSE

The ability to harness chaotic forces while remaining in control of oneself is anything but an easy task, and those who can accomplish this are said to have a certain magic about them, an air of mystery that surrounds someone like Houdini or Buster Keaton. These two examples might seem a bit strange at first, but not when seen in the context that they both serve as icons of controlling the chaotic. They both attest to the human ability to control adverse situations and the human ability to escape from and even temper that which seems beyond human capacity; they both perform magic. Buster Keaton offers a humorous and stoic way of dealing with life’s turmoil. He can play with death and danger and survive with his expressionless face intact; therefore, he can exist as a muse, as a source of inspiration and a creator of magical moments. Buster Keaton exemplifies what can be termed the mercurial ability to travel between chaos and order. Someone of this nature can function as an icon or muse in which a larger reality is mapped out against so as to show how the ability to harness life’s energies in an alchemical or magical way can be a struggle in a world that does not fully understand such a force. The interplay between someone like Keaton and a larger social environment not only illuminates how one’s spirit emerges within a social context, but also how that same presence can change the social environment if not destroyed first.
Rebecca Horn’s movie *Buster’s Bedroom* (1990) embodies the struggle that occurs when individuals who possesses the ability to access the powers of the occult uses them to alter not only themselves but the environment within which they exist. Horn envisioned Buster Keaton as such an individual, who through his actions which embrace the chaotic power of society and nature, transforms these forces. Keaton accomplishes this through his ability to transform and eventually control the technological devices around him. This control is achieved through the use of absurdist actions in which the boundaries between self, society, and nature are broken down, and a new sense of order arises. Buster Keaton exists as a filmic alchemist as a mediating factor between the power of the universe (cosmos) as a force of transformation and the chaotic world around him.

In Horn’s film *Buster’s Bedroom*, the character of Micha Morgan exists as a symbolic parallel to Buster Keaton and even in some respects to Horn herself, who through her work has created herself as an artistic alchemical parallel to Buster Keaton. The film exemplifies the type of conflict that occurs when society as a whole encounters a force like Micha Morgan (as a Keatonesque presence) in that society tries to capture the individual for its use. Also, the film exemplifies what can happen when alchemical (mystically infused) realities clash with a materialist system of existence. The clash can inextricably cause major changes in both parties. The following quotation attests to Horn’s desire to create change in how diverse forms of expression interrelate: “...*Buster’s Bedroom* (1990),...was first shown in connection with an exhibition, in order to create an intense
interaction between the distinct experiences of watching a movie and looking at art.”

And another quotation attests to how the film incorporates the element of absurdity a device that is employed to bring about change: “Buster’s Bedroom’s absurdist sets evoke the surrealist tradition of Luis Buñuel.”

The main character Micha, a film student on a trip from New York to California, is on a subconscious journey inspired by her muse and icon Buster Keaton to find out about his life. A symbol of the subconscious action of the journey is the fact that Micha drives with her eyes covered by a blue blindfold (See Fig. 37.). The blindfold symbolizes extending the power of perception to allow the intuition to take command. Micha resided at a friend’s studio in Los Angeles until she made a phone call to someone who knew about Buster Keaton. She found out that at one time Keaton stayed at a sanitarium in San Diego called Nirvana House. Upon finding this out, Micha made plans to visit the establishment. Buster Keaton convalesced at Nirvana House to combat his drinking problem due to his film career taking a dive and his failed marriage; due to an incident, he was taken off in a straitjacket. The inhabitants of Nirvana House are not actually in a state of Nirvana; rather, they exist in a state of contrived bliss as isolation. Their ill-conceived state of mystical existence occurs through the aid of objects, living or otherwise, that keep them in a perpetual state of hopefulness, one step from heaven.

Nirvana House is a home for strung-out famous people and defunct stars. Collectively,
the inhabitants represent the conflict between creative-subconscious spiritual impulses and those of Western society that are skeptical and obsessive. The viewers take part in this mental play in which they move from voyeur to participant, and in the process questions of what is real or not are blurred. The viewer becomes lost in the inhabitant's quest for a higher knowledge, in their quest for alchemical gold. Horn implicates the viewer in the mental and spiritual searching of the film by breaking the field of perception we objectively experience in the average Hollywood film. She achieves this by exposing the underlying nature of the characters in a physical way within the filmed space. She manifests their desires in a way that exposes the basic spiritual yearnings of the inhabitants of Nirvana House while also exposing the material trappings their desires dwell within, trappings that bend the inhabitants' perception of life. Horn implicates viewers by the fact that they have to interpret the characters’ actions as a parallel to their own real life experiences and quirks. By attempting to make sense of inhabitants’ actions, the viewer access the symbolic nature of these actions and become part of the difficult and slippery search for deeper fulfillment.184

Micha travels to Nirvana House in search of the story of Buster Keaton, but instead becomes a patient. A car carrying two makeshift nurses hits her. These nurses are called in to replace the other nurses who left after the death of the only medical doctor there. The doctor dies after mistakenly taking an injection of snake venom instead of his usual morphine. The doctor's use of morphine symbolizes a search for a mystical bliss

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through the only means believed to work, that of physical manipulation of the mind and body. The hired nurses don an older type of nurse’s uniform from the early twentieth-century to assume an identity that would fit into the residence’s collective cosmogony that exists as symbol of the closed and negative side of Western existence. Their cosmogony is one that they construct, and while it employs ritualistic practices and loosely parallels alchemical processes, it does not align with the process of birth and transformation espoused by alchemy and other occult followings. The alchemical underpinnings of Nirvana House are exemplified in how the inhabitants partake in rituals that are formed around their former identities as successful people within a society that praised them for their accomplishments. They believe that by achieving their former loves and glories, they will recapture the essence of their existence and thus end the chaotic struggle of their inner beings that hunger for meaning and knowledge. O’Connor, played by Donald Sutherland, decides to play the medical doctor so as to keep an expected ethics committee from closing down Nirvana House. O’Connor is an ornithologist who is currently studying snakes to figure out the nature of their energy. Suspicions arise upon Micha’s arrival about her being the inspector because she is taking pictures when hit by the car.

One of the inhabitants of Nirvana House who exemplifies the quest for a greater reality through the attempted manipulation of herself and others around her is Diana Daniels. Diana Daniels is a former famous diver and swimmer who is in a wheelchair out of choice. She is in a wheelchair first as a way due to her insurance claim and then as a type of physical meditation brought about by physical incapacitation. The purpose of this meditation is to transform body energy into mind and spirit energy. Daniels is a patient of
O'Connor. O'Connor has a theory and personal quest in which Daniels becomes like a snake and is catapulted to her former glory. This transformation will occur by taking on the mental presence of a snake with its stillness that can lead to extreme movement at a moment's notice. O'Connor's quest is quasi-alchemical in that he is studying the actions of something with strong symbolic and material presence. He engages in ritual action with the snakes in an attempt to unlock their deeper secrets as if they were an embodiment of the Philosopher's Stone. Daniels projects her needs and desires onto the scientific presence of O'Connor. He is a symbol that allows for the personification of Daniel's subconscious desires, encapsulated in her red dress and the overabundance of flowers in her room of the flowering tropical plant *Anthurium andraeanum rubrum* (Wax-flower) (See Fig. 38.). Immersed in her treatment as a physical journey, Daniels is trapped in the doctor as a prosthetic device for her ego.

Another character, Mr. Warlock, is dressed up as a symbolic bee who pollinates Micha's forehead with pollen from a Myrtle flower to awaken her consciousness. Within these characters, there exists certain aspects that Horn sees in herself. One example of this was Diane Daniels' level of incapacitation. A sense of incapacitation is something that Horn feels after creating her work. She feels spent after releasing her energy; therefore, a momentary stasis occurs in which other things substitute for her creative drive, like a state of dream or rest. Daniels stays in her state of fantasy play and convalescing creativity and does actualize her desires. Her unrealized desires circle in on themselves and create a state of mental anguish that eventually turns to madness.
Micha, mistaken for an inspector, becomes a part of the psychic mechanism of Nirvana House, representative of both outside social forces on the one hand and the presence of immutable spirit on the other. Micha is a parallel to Keaton, as a type of unicorn presence, who escaped confinement. Keaton was able to momentarily beat his addiction. Horn's own writing on Buster Keaton offers an insightful glimpse into his influence on her:

Rebecca Horn: *The Inner Straitjacket within the Outer*
For Buster Keaton, 1983-90

The straitjacket is an enclosed canvas jacket with very long arms, the ends of which are tied behind the back. Escape from the straitjacket: to flee the endless rhythm of human regulations, to disrupt and reverse the day and night rhythms. Imprisonment: to be aware of the abuse of the body's freedom, the torture of being condemned to immobility. The escape of the mind in the knowledge of its living imagination. To flee from the daily catatonia with a gigantic leap of human energy in the attempt to steal into the heavenly sphere. His timeless face, a sign behind which all feelings are hidden, the mask of a Geisha, of a Kabuki actor, that stands for all emotions, observing his imaginary, fictitious world with the detachment of a built-in camera. His alter ego, constantly pursuing itself through the unfolding plot and its mechanisms, peers, omniscient and sadly beautiful, over our shoulders. His films begin in the daily routine of events, in the streets, backyards, stairways, in scenes of sudden abandonment where railway trains race panic-stricken through the streets, trees are torn up by their roots, houses fly through the air, where the mechanics of human civilization confront nature, challenge it. In the course of the plot, events escalate to chaotic, threatening signs. He alone through his inventive intelligence can, like a dream-dancer, master the dangers with daredevil precision. He presents the spectator with an authentic exercise in the art of survival, fans out the whole range of action to the extremes of the possible, seducing and coercing the events into the phantasmagorical, where pursuing brides are transformed into boulders, falling trees into armies. Gradually he begins to rest himself against the energies in short lessons, like bungled acrobatic exercises. An inner explosion takes place suddenly, unexpectedly. With uncanny sureness he initiates the act of liberation from these forces threatening him from without. He develops magical powers which enable him to overcome all obstacles, as unperturbed as a fallen angel. His escape schemes are a ballet in defense of gentle violence. The helpless young man turns into a person who with the help of his mania for inventions is able to tame the elemental forces. Help doesn't come from the animate world; rather he breathes soul into the machines; they become his allies and partners, whom he can trust to aid him in warding off the unleashed energies. Through this ruse he astonishes
the world around him, only to stand around at the end like a shy, lonely victor, an initiate.\(^{185}\)

Micha, as Keaton's symbolic parallel, also exists in a way that fluctuates between the sacred and the profane. Micha awakes and starts to talk to various residents about Buster Keaton. First Micha talks to the bee-man Mr. Warlock, who refuses to discuss names. She then talks to Serafina, who holds a seance to contact Keaton's spirit. Micha then talks to Lenny Silver; a piano player more concerned with the mechanics of music than with its creative power. He did not want to talk film with Micha because he despised it, as once Buster Keaton did because of his father's prejudices.\(^{186}\)

Diana Daniels becomes concerned that Micha will ruin Nirvana House, but O'Connor wants to make her a patient so as to carry his experiments out on her. Daniels thinks that Micha is too spiritually immature and suggests to O'Connor that he conduct the straitjacket test on her as a form of isolation and incapacitation meditation. Unlike Daniels, Micha fought with all her subconscious strength. Daniels takes Micha to a room and locks her in it. Micha continues her struggles against imprisonment and eventually unleashes deep-seeded energies that send her body twirling into the air (See Fig. 39.). She busts through the confines of the straitjacket, like a metaphysical Houdini, who was Keaton's godfather. Micha taps into her inner-strength in a way that is inaccessible to the other inhabitants such as Diana Daniels.

Joe, a character whom Micha met in a bar earlier and who later became her lover,

\(^{185}\)Rebecca Horn, *The Inner Straitjacket within the Oscar For Buster Keaton*, 1983-90, Rebecca Horn (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1993), 234.

is preparing for the ritual enactment of Serafina’s reunion with her lost love. Serafina believes that Joe is her lost love and becomes alive and enchanted. After the performance, locked in a hypnotic trance with a snake, O’Connor is engaged in a sort of snake ritual. Micha walks in transfixed by the ritual. She inadvertently breaks the state of trance and the snake bites her. O’Connor extracts the poison with his mouth. Both of them sit together in an embrace and kiss and lick each other’s faces, therefore becoming snakes; in the process, an awakening occurs in Nirvana House. Joe and Micha push the residents of Nirvana House farther into their collective subconscious, into a place that is beyond the reality they have collectively created, one that disrupts the perpetual flow of unfulfilled creativity that is their knowable reality. Joe and Serafina are together in her room. Joe awakes and goes to the refrigerator for a drink and finds nothing but butterflies. He lays back down and the refrigerator door creaks back open, allowing the butterflies to awaken. All the butterflies start flying from their slumber. Serafina awakes in a start and exclaims “My souls have strayed. I cannot find their resting place.”

Daniels sees Micha in O’Connor’s lap after the bite incident and feels enraged. Micha flees from the room, and Daniels pursues her; they both end up at the pool. Completely enraged, Daniels forgets about her self-imposed immobilization and starts to walk. Micha functions as a catalyst, breaking the glamorous spell of Nirvana House. Daniels, with a whip in hand, attempts to attack Micha with it (See Fig. 40.). Micha jumps into the pool. Daniels pursues Micha, and her own wheelchair goes out of control.

188 Rebecca Horn, Rebecca Horn: Buster’s Bedroom a filmbook (New York: Parkett Publishers, 1991), 108.
knocking her into the pool. The chair knocks Daniels into the pool and crashes on her back, breaking her spine and drowning her. O’Connor and the other residents arrive by the pool. O’Connor, who is conversing with someone, discovers that Micha is not from the committee. The news relieves O’Connor, for now, Micha can become his new patient—the focal point of his snake energy experiments.

Micha eventually escapes Nirvana House pursued by O’Connor, the nurses, and all the remaining residents. Not far from the ocean, they catch up with her and a celebration replete with rock music ensues. Micha moves from partner to partner, while everyone is dancing, and ends up at the ambulance that transported everyone. Micha takes the ambulance and once again escapes. Joe is hiding in the back under some sheets. He reveals himself by starting a record player that is in the back. Micha, surprised to see him, loses control and crashes into a billboard. Near the end of the film, Micha and Joe enter the subconscious realm of the ocean to be reborn in one another. The residents are watching from afar through binoculars as they descend into the ocean frolicking. The binoculars are symbolic of the mechanical and material level of separation that exists between the staff and residents of Nirvana House and Joe and Micha, and as a voyeuristic non-participatory view of life, a reality that Horn disrupts through the narrative force of Joe and Micha.

Joe and Micha existed as symbolic objects to possess, as something that encapsulated the inhabitants’ idealized vision of existence, rather than as people who live and can instill the others with subconscious energy. The basis of their relationship to Joe and Micha was purely on the level of persona and not on the revelation of subconscious
identity. The inhabitants of Nirvana House, caught in material consciousness, could have escaped this confinement if they would have dug deeper into the persona that merges into the psyche. The persona would have subsequently lead to personal energies that reveal themselves in symbolic ways. The subconscious desire presented in Horn's work is parallel to and manifested in sexual desire, which is a basic metaphor of subconscious interaction that Horn employs throughout her work (i.e., the royal marriage.) Sex and desire connect to the subconscious like artistic creativity, which is like childbirth in a metaphorical sense, as a rebirth of self. Horn even calls her works her children and equates the process of artistic creation with the birth process. The act of projection or communing with other objects and people occurs with a momentary death of ego. Otherwise, one becomes caught between subconscious and material existence, like the residents of Nirvana House. The state of suspension in part is of necessity as a root between the subconscious and the material as a unicorn-like anchor that facilitates the subconscious. If the process goes unfulfilled, then the dark possibility of spiritual communion and symbolic interaction is revealed. In this state of darkness, the individual suspended like a hanged man or a pendulum swinging away at its target, never to reach its goal because a personal death has not occurred. The end result is that a state of purgatory ensues. The presence of Micha and Joe acted as a catalyst for a disruption of the life of the inhabitants in a way that opened them up to a deeper level of existence by exemplifying a positive presence and a deeper state of consciousness through the expression of their

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deeper desires in a mystical capacity. A capacity, that while still beguiling to Western perception, is an attitude toward life that Horn wishes to convey. The end result of adapting a Keatonesque view of life is that both the chaos of life and the confinements of social action are combined in a relationship that favors the creative instead of the overly controlling side of human nature.
CHAPTER XIII

CONCLUSION:

ALCHEMY AND THE MECHANICS OF INTERPRETATION

Alchemy functions as a system of thought that encompasses and expands upon materialistic existence. It creates, for the initiates, a system of connecting to the basic spiritual powers of the universe and offers a way to manifest these powers within material reality through the mystical manipulation of essential materials. Alchemy as a system of thought has to be created in a system of self creation in which the initiates, by learning the basic tenets of alchemy through experimentation and reflection, begins envisioning a new state of existence between themselves and the universe around them. Within the process of becoming a practitioner of alchemy, the initiates become closely connected to the life of the universe they inhabit as an integral part of that universe and as someone who can harness the powers of the universe. Through the process of personal transformation, individuals move into the realm of the spirit and is therefore no mere observer or passive recipient of the life of the cosmos, but instead an active force of creation. In order to exist in such a capacity, the initiates must create their own personal cosmogonial picture fueled by the paradoxically stable yet malleable alchemical system. Through their dealings, the initiates create their own personal way of manifesting the spiritual; they must connect the

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sacred to the profane and theory to practice. The ability to create and maintain an alchemical view of existence is always predicated on the type of culture and society individuals exist within. Needless to say, the cultural mindset of the twentieth century Western-existence, and even arguably twentieth-century life in general, is not conducive to such a perspective as alchemy.

Twentieth-century life has become an edifice of facts, mere answers to the material questions that our culture asks. What are the questions that alchemy and Horn’s work ask? The answers are not as data. Rather, the answers are a revelation of our association with the world around us. Answers not in the sense of scientific enlightenment but rather answers that create more questions, questions that disable logical thinking enough to create a state of meditation. This expansion allows deeper access to the interiors of our minds. This is due to the fact that part of the fundamental process of thought is metaphorical and symbolic. Something else that adds to the reality of our connection to the cosmos is that in spiritual and symbolic action, reality becomes more than just sense impression. Reality becomes an interplay of self and world in which we contemplate ourselves in the world.

Rebecca Horn’s whole oeuvre has been part of the creation of an alchemically-inspired vision to create a way to manifest the fullest amount of life’s spirit, or what she likes to call energy. In order to carry out this desire, Horn has through her work confronted the viewer’s senses in a somewhat beguiling and shocking way with the intention of creating a fervor in which the mind is challenged to look upon life in a new perspective. Through her work, Horn constructs a way of interacting with and
experiencing life in a highly aestheticized, symbolic, and creative way. Her art functions alchemically in the way which she uses materials to unlock the nature of a space or to distill a presence for an object, such as a shoe. Within Horn’s work, a simple pair of shoes becomes the container for someone’s spirit or personal energy. Through the presence of electricity, she can invoke something that might seem hidden at first. At the heart of Rebecca Horn’s work are paradoxical and anarchic tendencies. These tendencies throw the mind off to reveal the conflictual side of human nature, the animalism that the ego tries to cover up for survival purposes to keep the mind from being overwhelmed. The basic structure of alchemy, within the modern context, creates a state of conflict with preexisting modes of thought in such a way that new connections towards a higher state of consciousness are enhanced through the disarming of the ego. While Horn embraces the anarchic powers of animistic spirit energy, she also dons the mask of the liberated machine. The liberated machine is a living being that filters down energy in an alchemical process of distillation so as to manifest this energy in life. The machine becomes a facilitating mask instead of a shallow object of closed perception.

Nature, as expressed in alchemy, is immersed in cosmic creation and the ongoing processes of life and death. We, as humans, are not so perceptually immersed because we can see the nature of our existence in which we look beyond just material possibilities and make decisions based on our observances. The ability to analyze and decide somewhat removes us from nature. Other animals fulfill their possibilities directly through nature. Therefore, they are closer to the *prima materia* and consequently the *massa confusa*, and
that is why they are excellent spiritual beings and symbolic metaphors, gateways to the subconscious.

By primarily focusing on linear logic, epitomized by science and language, we are denying a large part of our reality not manifested through such logical means. Fact alone does not drive our imaginations. Rhetorically and symbolically speaking, people are more persuaded by appearance, belief, persona, and other sensory devices that play off their inner conceptions of life. These rhetorical elements emerge metaphorically as images and not as data. By focusing on data-oriented materialism we shut ourselves off from other forms of knowledge. Thus, I come to the purpose of Horn's work as a parallel system to alchemy, something that manifests life's spiritual energies and that allows access to the various levels of subconscious and spiritual desires, energies, and knowledge which place her work deep within the structure of alchemy. By creating an artistic bridge to the subconscious through fantastic images that mirror subconscious play, Horn not only opens the psyche, she also offers a vehicle for the attachment of psychic thoughts and impulses. Horn's work has the ability to incorporate these energies into physical reality through the use of alchemical processes and materials that embody and symbolize this very energy.

Horn alludes to this point herself in an interview with Stuart Morgan.

R.H. I was isolated in a sanatorium for almost a year! My parents died. There was a feeling of timelessness. In the sanatorium they would say, 'Why don't you stay for another six months? By that time we might have different medicines.' As a result I developed totally different ways of making art. That's when I started to produce my first body-sculptures. I could sew lying in bed. The idea was to work with the body having connections with another body. In fact, my tense relationship with performance art began at this time.

S.M. The use of the word 'energies' to describe this early work seems particularly apt. Your pieces were about rituals performed in order to allow the characteristics of people
to flare out, and when that happens, they are most and least themselves. They’re like courtship rituals, in which we are out of control. Can such energies be harnessed?

R.H. Somehow. At least in my work. More and more.

S.M. You seem to be inviting danger. The danger seems to come, and then everything is alright again.

R.H. But very often it’s a shock. You’re moving through an experience. Suddenly there’s a flash of lightning, and everything becomes very clear. Or you’re so frightened you can’t breathe, the same flash happens, and you see things in a totally fresh and different way.192

This type of revelation is accentuated and fostered by immersing the self in the type of environment presented in Horn’s work. In order to present her reality to the viewer in a full capacity, Horn had to develop the vision within herself, and in the process of presenting her work to the public, she not only educated them—she developed personally. By developing and employing an alchemical vision of existence, Horn is able, as stated in her own words, to manifest energies increasingly in her work. Meaning is in part revealed through association and symbolic attachment. By attaching subconscious thoughts onto material objects such as people, places, human artifacts, elemental materials, and the like, Horn creates a parallel association between, say, Oscar Wilde and coal. In Hydra Forest, Horn creates a chain reaction of association. Associations and ponderings about where coal comes from, its color, and its use, all of which become metaphors for Oscar Wilde. He is no longer just a historic figure; he is now an embodiment of life’s struggles and creation. Between the coals on the ground and the flashes of electricity in the metaphorical sky, Oscar Wilde has become a spiritual presence. He goes beyond the artistic flashes of energy that lead to his social downfall. Through his creations, he lives

on as a force that defies space and time and thus becomes a force of inner transformation and also a source of knowledge of the inner workings of the human psyche.\textsuperscript{193}

Horn’s work exposes the basis of mechanistic thinking as a drive to gain control, as a process that, in and of itself, has a spiritual basis in the religious act of controlling nature. By employing machines and mechanistic structures as a basic metaphor in her work for the human, she begs the question as for the driving impulse behind machines to express the magical and religious side of mechanical thinking that links it to its pre-scientific alchemical roots. Mechanistic thinking is given a life of its own as something that mimics the ego, the machine as a human philosophical and psychic construction. In doing this, along with giving life to subconscious visions and personal desires and emotions, Horn creates a living drama out of human drives. Through the combination of multiple realities of existence, Horn creates a type of cosmogony in which materialistic perspectives fused with new life live in synchronicity with a magical perspective of existence. Exposure to the symbolic and dual side of our nature is something that is due to our existential situation. Being so immersed in our reality, we can never fully escape nature’s context or even, in reality, partially escape. Rather, we hide or mask ourselves from nature through the edifice of society, through the necessarily materialistic drive of the ego.\textsuperscript{194}

Horn’s machines, with their erratic behavior, display the hidden underside of mechanistic thinking. While machines, technology, and science are necessary, they only

\textsuperscript{193}Juan Eduardo Cirlot, \textit{A Dictionary of Symbols} (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), xxx-xxxi.

tap away at surface reality and leave a whole reality uncharted. In her book *Philosophy in New Key*, Susanne Langer has come to the conclusion that: “Observation has become almost entirely indirect; and readings take the place of genuine witness. The sense-data on which the propositions of modern science rest are, for the most part, little photographic spots and blurs, or inky curved lines on paper.”

Geometric and mathematic precision are one way of inscribing one’s view of reality. In the whole of nature and human existence, there exists the power of shape, rhythm, color and essential materials that connect us to the world. In the context of alchemy and Horn’s work, circles become the perpetual spiral of time and movement, a metaphor for the seasons of human existence. Squares in alchemy and Horn’s work become expressions of the golden mean. They symbolize perception in constant oneness. In this interpretive system, cones become metaphors for the interplay of masculine and feminine energies that moves within all of us. Jung respectively calls them anima and animus. These energies are a subconscious reality that finds its material release and equivalence in the shape of our sexual bodies that act as spatial inscribers of our personal identity.

In the end, Horn epitomizes how science and religion exist on a common ground. Both of these realities need the other. They both are in a constant process of courtship tinged with death. They both must die a little to come together. In the case of Oscar Wilde and Buster Keaton, when the material becomes overwhelming, as it frequently does,

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the artistic self pushes into the face of destruction. The work of Rebecca Horn focuses on
the search to divulge subconscious desire so as to conceptually melt together all aspects of
life. Susanne Langer makes the point quite clear:

Only a part-how-be-it a very important part of our behavior is practical. Only some of
our expressions are signs, indicative or mnemonic, and belong to the heightened
animal wisdom called common sense; and only a small relatively unimportant part are
immediate signs of feeling. The remainder serve simply to express ideas that the
organism yearns to express, i.e. to act upon, with out any practical purpose without any
view to satisfying other needs than the need of completing in overt action the brain's
symbolic process.196

Horn's work is both magical and tragic in outlook. The magical aspect's "direct
motivation is the desire to symbolize great conceptions."197 The tragic side of Horn's
work is due to the necessary death of the ego, or its sublimation to the subconscious both
on a personal and social level. The tragic side of the alchemical process is that a death of
self must occur--a burning away of what is unnecessary to achieve the essential self. The
tragic side also reveals itself as a sought-after escape from the confines of social existence
as the grand machine of humanity. Tragedy occurs with the realization that something
must die in order to have freedom. Sometimes, the tragedy occurs because freedom can
only exist in something like the physical act of submersion into alcohol. The action of
alcoholic submersion is a shallow act without a sense of reflection. Drinking oneself to
death is parallel to the desire to merge with the subconscious. A similar action occurs at
the end of Buster's Bedroom when Micha and Joe partake in a symbolic act of suicide by
running off into the Pacific Ocean.

196Ibid., 43.
197Ibid., 49.
The dark presence of death and tragedy made an early presence in Horn's oeuvre with *Paradise Widow*. *Paradise Widow* is a dark, inspiring side of the unconscious in its liquid chthonic side, its dark Dionysian associations. *Paradise Widow* offers insight, growth, and rebirth to a higher vision of self as the gifts of the psyche and subconscious materialize in some capacity. Horn's allows her examinations of human nature to exist instead of denying the darker realities and does not submerge herself into material pleasures as a form of social and material acceptance. Darker realities are a perpetual aspect of existence a spiritual reality and something that continues to exist long after the material vanishes. Horn remarked how feathers remain after the bird is dead, as a type of skeleton. Feathers act as a reminder that there exists a reality beyond our own personal vision. Feathers are a symbol of the continuation of life, of a power beyond us, whether it is a deity or the power of nature.

After *Paradise Widow*, the mechanical perspective transformed into a vehicle offering movement into the subconscious. The piece also accessed the power of animals in a metaphorical sense. No longer just contained within the mixing of fantastic images and animals to create mythic creatures, *Hybrid* became a space of new identity. Neither was it just an expression of an ideal. Rather, the purpose was that the human space and the space of the earth as a whole became interchangeable. The purpose of using symbolically powerful materials in alchemy is to reveal the basic processes of all life. Essential materials can express powerful change and also express the fact that the very earth itself is alive with energies. Increasingly after *Hybrid*, Horn's work embodied the concept of the physical manifestation of spiritual energy.
Horn’s performances of the late ‘70s exemplified the melting between the self and psyche. Upon reaching the *prima materia* and *massa confusa* of *Paradise Widow*, the golden spirit must awaken its slumbering brother in the darkness. The masculine and the feminine must mix and separate to continue the process of growth on a grander scale. During the process, the spirit spirals out of the psyche in ever increasing flashes like the electrical bolts in *Hydra Forest*. *Golden Bath* was a manifestation of the spirit a vision of the philosopher’s stone where everything, including new life, can be born. In *Golden Bath*, the manifestation of energies, the coming together of opposites, and the fruit of marriage on one level must merge. This coming together must manifest before a deeper sense of expansion can occur through yet another process of personal death. *Pendulum* and *Radius Inscriber* were indicative of works in the ‘80s. Horn’s exploration of the processes of life and death transformed the mechanics of material action and lead to an expansion of perception. This expansion became possible by the ever increasing presence of nature itself. After this level of subconscious searching has occurred, Horn’s work increasingly focuses on the process of change itself in the totality of its possibilities. In works from the late ‘80s and into the ‘90s, mercury along with the metaphorical presence of the moon becomes predominant icons of change fluid movement between psyche and material existence.

With the realization of separation between our material bodies and our spiritual bodies of imagination, Horn created works to break down the differences between the

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two. In Horn’s performances of the ‘70s, there occurred a courtship of opposites on a level that allowed for the distinction between inner and outer realities.

Horn explored the underlying occult reality behind the ego and mechanical reality. This exploration occurred in such a way that all facets of life from the personal to the historic and even the very presence of nature itself is imbued with a spirit of knowledge and possibility. The opening up of life’s opposites during Horn’s work of the ‘70s and the ‘80s place focus on the symbolization of actions. It also expanded the fuller exploration of the subconscious. The expansion and creation of a personal cosmogony began emerging due to the manifestation of opposites as a force of change. This cosmological perspective transformed everything in its path. The end result of this transformation is that Horn has dealt with every aspect of existence ranging from architecture to the insane. Horn’s work in the ‘90s focused on the very core of human consciousness; the constant movement between all realms of human reality. Mechanistic thinking was given a life of its own, transformed into a symbol of human cohesion. Within the cosmos, vision and feeling itself expanded in the process. Synaesthesia occurred as the body was no longer wrapped in feathers but in an all encompassing reality. The psyche ruptured the ego and permeated everything. The alchemical clash was happening all the time; everything offered revelation, places became revivified.

Horn created a mask of possibility in works such as Paradise Widow, Unicorn and Mechanical Body Fan. These masks of possibility are mercurial in nature. They are Apollonian and Dionysian in nature. The masculine and feminine material and subconscious both live in the mask. Apollo, as the sun god, is ego and Dionysus, as the
god of foliage and wine, is the subconscious that represents the liquefying aspects of chthonic nature. Part of the ego must die like the sun dipping into the ocean, like the lion (mercury in alchemy) devouring the sun. Although the sun is not completely dead if it is to resurrect the buried part of itself lying within the subconscious it must remain rooted in material reality, in life. This must be the case in order for the buried sun (soul) to ascend anew like a phoenix. The phoenix wears a death mask. Death mask and resurrection are the same thing, like the paradoxical nature of Paradise Widow. That which kills also creates life because in the alchemical process like creates like. Paradox is the basis of human existence. The act of falling into the opening between material and subconscious reality and not being able to understand what a symbol means is a misinterpretation of a life occurrence. To interpret the process of life just as material reality substantiates a basic lack of understanding as to the nature of the psyche. Alchemy and Horn’s works are ultimately systems of interpretation. They both are a way of interpreting and realizing our positions in the world because, as Langer and Jung point out, the occult is a deep seat of knowledge that eclipses and informs existence.

The sensory force driving Horn’s own filmic machine is of a libidinal nature. Watching the filmic performances of the 1970s, one is reminded of Sigmund Freud’s words describing technology as a bodily “supplement”: “With every tool man is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits to their functioning. Motor power places gigantic forces at his disposal, which like the muscles, he can employ in any direction.”

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The body, with its multifarious aspects of emotions, desires and motivations, as well the physical process of life were embodied in Horn's early work. Embedded within the earlier works was the symbolic reality that was manifested in Horn's later work. This symbolic reality exemplifies the essential quality of the physical and spiritual aspects of life. While there exists an infinite amount of possibilities of the personal use and interpretation, there exists for everyone and everything parameters that demarcate the realm of physical existence. This space of demarcation is a malleable causeway to the spirit.

Horn's work brings the past and present together in a combination of ever-mixing life, death, and renewal. Horn's work mirrors and gives vision to the flashes and movements of the soul. She gives vision to expanded levels of reality. Manifesting expanded realities gives life to new possibilities and new understanding to what the mind can accomplish. Her work also creates expanded playing room for the imagination that, by its nature, can never be totally known. Opening up the rational mechanistic side of existence to expose how the machine was connected to the body exemplifies how the body makes the machine. This type of opening was achieved when the combination and revelation of the possibilities of the various aspects of the human capacity were set out at the beginning of Horn's career. Explaining how these various frameworks join together, fight it out, and fall apart reveals itself as the overall use of alchemical materials and processes increase in Horn's work. Alchemy is a starting point, a process that allows for a type of perception to come into existence, and since it is about process, it is also about revelation and journeying. Alchemy bridges divergent forces. This capacity to change is
evident in the work of some Surrealists, such as Max Ernst, and the Spanish artist Remedios Varo. The fantastic and the super-real merge to create new visions in their work. Horn mentioned Surrealist artists and their writings as having an influence on her work. Surrealist elements, or at least Surrealist-like constructions, are evident in the work of Louis Buñuel, a French filmmaker who collaborated at one time with Salvador Dali. Other influences on Horn that brought together fantasy and reality are Jean Genet, a French novelist and playwright, and Franz Kafka. Kafka is a novelist who brought together fantasy and reality as a way to reveal a more complete vision of human existence. Kafka's notion that art reveals a truer side of life in the quotation “The terror of art...” is that “…the dream reveals the reality” is strongly evident in Horn’s work. Alchemy is not the manipulation of metals for ulterior motives, it is a spiritual process of gaining knowledge, and it is an interpretive system. In the beginning of Horn’s oeuvre, the general fantastic, magical and occult flavor of her work starts the creation of an interpretive system through which the influence of alchemy, Surrealism, Jean Genet, along with other inspirations found further life in her work.

Alchemy is about transformation and transmutation, it is about how the cosmos reveals itself in the world around us, how the qualities of materials reveal the process of life, death, and renewal. The whole process is a search for closure and a return back to the spirit. Within Horn’s work, the confluence of the spirit and the material realms is the aim; the marriage of the two is the ultimate quest of human existence. The process in

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Horn's work is sometimes construed as a closed system, yet to view it in such a light would not be experiencing alchemy as a life perspective.

Alchemy is the perfect artistic tool for Horn's project of manifesting inner creative capabilities that in the broader context of Horn's view of art encompasses the spiritual side of human existence. Alchemy is the perfect tool because, through its basic structure and through its philosophy, it links together the sacred and the profane (the material which is the realm of science and the spiritual). The scientific, or more accurately the proto-scientific, side of alchemy exists within its exploration of essential materials such as mercury, gold, silver, and lead in a way that explores their spiritual presence as it is manifested in the chemical (alchemical) processes. The spiritual side of the alchemical process exists in its ability to connect practitioners to the universe around them in an act of unlocking its secrets by making the practitioner a participant in the creative action of the universe. Horn achieves this confluence of the sacred and the profane in her work through her use of alchemical materials from lead to mercury and in her creation of works that through their manifestation of the alchemical process give life to some of the very core actions and feelings of not only the artist but humanity in general. The scientific and the materialistic are made present in Horn's use of tactile materials from sulfur to eggs, and pigments and from the mechanical nature of much of her work. Horn opens up the scientific through her alchemically inspired process of working so as to allow the fuller aspects of human existence to manifest themselves. Therefore, she reconnects science, through an alchemical presence, to a point in time in Western thought when the sacred and the profane, religion and science, were not so separate if separate at all. Both the spiritual
and the scientific emerge from the common human need of identifying with and controlling the forces of nature (the universe).
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