2021

LORENZA BÖTTNER: REQUIEM FOR THE NORM

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This text accompanies
Lorenza Böttner: Requiem for the Norm
Curated by Paul B. Preciado
Montreal: Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery (2021)
April 29–June 19, 2021

Overlooked by the dominant historiography of art until relatively recently, the work of Lorenza Böttner—an artist who painted with her mouth and feet, and who used photography, drawing, dance, installation, and performance as means of aesthetic expression, emerges today as an indispensable contribution to the criticism of bodily and gender normalization in the late twentieth century.

As exercises in resistance to the medical gaze that

reduces the functionally diverse and trans body to the status of an exotic specimen and object, Lorenza Böttner's works are characterized not only by the use of self-fiction, the dissident imitation of visual styles from the history of art, and bodily experimentation, but also by criticism of the disciplinary divide between genders and *genres*, between painting, dance, performance, and photography, between object and subject, masculine and feminine, homosexuality and heterosexuality, the normative body and the trans body, between active and passive, and between valid and invalid. This exhibition, the first international retrospective dedicated to her, asks: In what frame of representation can a body make itself visible as human? Who has the right to represent? Who is the represented? Can an image grant or deny a body political agency? How can a body construct an image to become a political subject? Is there any aesthetic difference between an image made with the hand and another made with the foot, or does this difference lie in a power relationship?

The Art of Living

To speak of Lorenza Böttner's artistic practice one has to begin with her biography, not as a simple narration of facts, but as a vitalist manifesto, as the most persistent practice in Lorenza's work is a blurring of the distinction between life and art. Born on March 6, 1959, into a family of German immigrants in Punta Arenas, Chile, Lorenza Böttner was assigned male at birth. At the age of eight, Lorenza suffered a severe electric shock while climbing an electricity pylon in an attempt to get hold of a bird's nest. For several days after the accident, it was touch and go as to whether the child would live or die. After the amputation of both arms, Lorenza underwent a long, painful process of hospitalisation, during which s/he attempted suicide.

In 1969, Irene Böttner, her/him mother, moved with Lorenza to Germany so her child could access specialized therapies; but the recovery was accompanied by a disciplinary institutionalisation process. Lorenza was interned as a disabled person at the Heidelberg Rehabilitation Centre and educated at the Orthopaedic Rehabilitation Clinic in Lichtenau alongside the so-called "Contergan children." Prescribed

between 1957 and 1963 as a sedative for pregnant woman, this thalidomide-based medication provoked the birth of hundreds of thousands of babies with modifications to their arms and legs. Victims of the errors of pharmacological industry, at once socially rejected and spectacularized by the media, these “thalidomide children” were the material signifier of the pharmacopornographic capitalist transformation of body politics taking place in the West after the Second World War. It was there, in that damned, subaltern cradle that Lorenza Böttner was born. Lorenza rejected the prosthetic arms that would supposedly have rehabilitated her/his body into one deemed “normal”; s/he rejected being educated as a disabled child and spent most of her/his time drawing, painting, and dancing. Lorenza was born out of the resistance to the process of being transformed into a “son of thalidomide”: the close knowledge of physical pain and social rejection, which subsequently transmuted into political struggle for recognition and the exaltation of life, meant that Lorenza’s own body would become one of her main artworks: a vulnerable, neo-baroque monument to life.

Lorenza's Birth

Going against the medical diagnosis and social expectations that promised a future of "social inclusion" as a disabled person, Lorenza fought to be accepted into the Gesamthochschule Kassel (now a School of Art and Design), enrolling as a student from 1978 to 1984 under the supervision of Harry Kramer; it was during this time in Kassel that she changed her name to Lorenza and assumed a publicly female identity. She then began a visual and performative exploration in which the self-portrait and dance served as techniques of experimental self-construction. For Lorenza, transvesting herself in images of the norm was a way of dancing a requiem for a norm that had died. The drawings, prints, paintings, and performances she did over the intense sixteen-year period of her life as an artist (1978 to 1994) show her occupying a plurality of positions, not only of sex and gender, but also in history and time. Lorenza wasn't simply transgender, she was transchronological: an elegant Victorian lady, a muscular young man with glass arms, a ballerina, a punk girl, a Greek statue, a flamenco dancer, Batman's bride, Miss World, a sex worker, a model,

a traveller, a breast-feeding mother, a young BDSM enthusiast, an ephebe with the wings of Icarus, etc. Lorenza was interested in the simultaneity of embodiments and not in identity as a static place. Her transvestism was not mimicry of femininity as an identity—it was usual to see her with a beard or naked—but rather an enlargement of the body's gestural repertoire, an expansion of the possibilities of action. Lorenza was transition and not identity. Rather than speak of transvestism, more appropriate is to speak of practices of transition as techniques of unlearning by which the body and subjectivity considered "disabled" or "sick" recover their right to representation. In the same manner, it is not adequate to say that Lorenza used her feet and mouth as hands, or that she simply dressed as a woman, but that she instead invented another body, another artistic practice and gender: neither disabled nor normal, neither male nor female, neither painting nor dance.

The Politicization of Freaks: From Disability to Crip Pride

Lorenza graduated from Kassel in 1984 with a thesis

entitled *Behindert?!* (Disabled?!*)*. In this first-person chronicle of her accident and the processes of healing and learning to paint and dance, she criticized the normative representation of the non-conforming body and advocated for an artistic practice capable of recognizing an armless body as a political and artistic agent. For the performance accompanying her thesis, *Lorenza, das Wunder ohne Arme. Freaks* (Lorenza, the Armless Miracle. Freaks)*,* she researched the historical precedent of the freak show and its role in the modern invention of disability. In face of medical narratives, Lorenza sought to inscribe her body, her subjectivity, and her artistic production in a political lineage of armless painters such as Thomas Schweiker, Louis Steinkogler, or Aimée Rapin, whose work was presented at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition. Rapin's eminently feminine themes, her floral compositions, the attention paid to the hair in her portraits, were constant motifs in Lorenza's pictorial work. In the 1980s and 1990s, during her trips to New York, Lorenza actively took part in the Disabled Artists Network with Sandra Aronson but criticized the charitable and humanist models that framed disabled people as marginal artists. Confronting theories

of outsider art and art therapy, Lorenza understood the relationship between the hand and the foot as a power struggle. In the same way that feminist artists use works of art as a conceptual space in which to negotiate representations of the female body as an object of the heterosexual gaze, Lorenza's work questions the technologies of normalization, objectivization, and institutionalization that lead to a functionally diverse body being constructed as disabled. In this sense, the political genealogy of Lorenza's pioneering work can be found in the works of Jennifer Miller, Del LaGrace Volcano, Mat Fraser, Amanda Baggs, and Park MacArthur.

The Face That Is Not One

In the same way that Lorenza transformed streets of Kassel to Santiago in Chile, passing through New York or Barcelona, into a new exhibition and performance space, so she transformed her own skin into a canvas that permitted her to rewrite a critical dialogue with the norm and imposed identities. Many of Lorenza's "danced paintings" and performances began with the act of painting her face.

Holding the brush with her foot, she would redraw the contours of her eyes, cover her cheeks and forehead with triangles, or draw lines that divided the face. The notion of transvestism is too narrow and conventional to describe the constant erasure and revision activated by this process. By turning it into a surface of inscription, Lorenza denaturalised the face as the site of identity—of gender, race, humanity—and asserted it as a socially constructed mask that she could help to redraw.

In 1983, she created a series of photos called *Face Art* in which the face is the operator of a never-ending metamorphosis. In addition to using pigments, Lorenza employed her hair, beard, and eyebrows as formal and chromatic motifs to construct a face that was not one. Unlike the post-modern strategies of Cindy Sherman and Orlan, the proliferation of masks in Lorenza's case was not the result of a random combination of social signs or historic and cultural signifiers. Her self-portraits belong to an artistic lineage that uses self-fiction photography against disciplinary photography. Like Claude Cahun, Jürgen Klauke, Michel Journiac, Suzy Lake, and Jo Spence, Lorenza used the self-

portrait as a technique of resistance to colonial, medical, and police photography, in which the image served to identify the "other," constructing it as primitive, sick, disabled, deviant, or criminal. With regard to these taxonomies, she experimented with the making of dissident faces: constant variation produced de-identification rather than a quest for a simply female identity. Lorenza's masks criticize the systematic erasure of the trans-crip body as a political subject, its exoticisation or its reduction to a sickness, while at the same time asserting plurality, transformation, and relationality as profound structures of subjectivity.

The Museum of Desire and Melancholy

Lorenza's pieces—large pastel formats or small pencil or pen drawings—are linked to two scales: the foot situates the work at a distance of more than a metre and a half from the eye, whereas the mouth situates the painting at less than 50 centimetres from the gaze. While the vast majority of Lorenza's photos and oil paintings are self-portraits, her wax paintings document the different places she visited, beginning in 1984. These paintings introduce a gallery of

socially subaltern characters with whom the artist established an alliance through drawing: Amsterdam prostitutes, African Americans as the object of police violence in New York, lesbian sexuality under the shadow of the male gaze, and gay sexuality depicted as a tender bond.

The paintings in wax and pastels, realized for the most part in the street, are exceptional not only for their mode of execution, but also for their thematic content and their dialogue with art history. Historically, mouth- and foot-painting artists have been forced to paint in disciplinary institutions or in the street, to choose realistic techniques, and to mimic the conventions of art from every period to demonstrate their "ability." Again, Lorenza does not desert that position. Instead, she occupies it eccentrically. Lorenza transforms the act of painting in the public space into a vitalist dance performance and a trans-crip happening. A dual distortion is at work here: one that arises from a change of perspective, a displacement of the subject of the pictorial enunciation, and another that comes from introducing the presence of the subaltern body within representation. There was a desire in Lorenza to queer the entire history of art, to

distort it from her own subaltern position. Like a kind of queer Mannerism, her museum of desire and melancholy includes Fauvist, Expressionist, Impressionist, Cubist, and Neorealist versions, among others, of armless ballerinas à la Degas, gay saunas in the style of Michelangelo or Ingres, punk prostitutes that could be by Toulouse-Lautrec, Expressionist-like 1980s disco scenes, or Goyaesque self-portraits as an armless mother breastfeeding her child.

The Body as a Social Sculpture

In various performances in the 1980s, Lorenza emulated the classical works the *Venus de Milo* and the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* in order to explore the tension between a mutilated body and an ideal of beauty, between a ruin and a norm. Thus, for example, in New York in 1986, first at an informal meeting of artists in the East Village and then at a charity concert at Hunter College, Lorenza had her body covered in a fine layer of plaster until it was transformed into the *Venus de Milo*. According to the Chilean writer Pedro

Lemebel, her performance cushioned the blow to the shoulders and transvested the mutilated evidence into Hellenic surgery. Lorenza decided not only to become the armless sculpture, but to embody Aphrodite, moulding breasts on her torso and combing her hair like the Greek goddess. The gender tension is clearly visible in the discontinuity between the female torso and the small line of body hair beginning at the navel and disappearing under the tunic. What is interesting here, however, is not so much the petrification of Lorenza, but rather the process by which she destroyed the sculpture as a socially normalizing orthopaedic mould. The initial moment of embodiment of the canon—the artist who had transformed herself into a sculpture—gave way to a corrosive criticism of the role of art in the social normalization of the white, cis-gender, valid, heterosexual body. On top of a mobile podium, Lorenza as Venus was moved from the back of the stage to the centre, seeking a direct encounter with the public gaze. That was when she opened her eyes, looked inquisitively at the audience, and spoke: “What would you think if art came to life?” Coming down from the podium and dancing in front of the audience, Lorenza recast the relationship between power and gaze. Against the passiveness

and silence imposed on the functionally diverse body, dance and voice are techniques of social empowerment that seek to increase the power to act.

Painting as a Performative Trans-Crip Guerrilla Action

Through the 1980s, at the same time that feminist practices and non-white artists questioned the patriarchal and colonial foundations of the museum as a democratic institution, Lorenza transformed the street into an improvised studio, gallery, and museum, making that "outside" a place for creation and political revindication for an armless artist. Indeed, it was in 1982, during documenta 7—the polemic international exhibition led by Rudi Fuchs in which no works by mouth or foot artists were shown—that Lorenza, still a student, transformed the streets of Kassel into a guerrilla exhibition space to give visibility to her *Erinnerungen* (memories). Standing in the middle of the busiest street leading to the renowned Fridericianum, with just a piece of paper and some pastel chalks on the ground, she painted, danced, and bared her armless body to the surprised gaze of passers-by. Lorenza invented a new genre of artistic

intervention that she tentatively called “danced painting” (*Tanzmalerei*) or “pantomime painting” (*Pantomimenmalerei*). The artist sought a closeness to the public that only the street allows: a precarious, frictional space, the street also becomes a place where the public unlearns the way it looks at a body or a canvas. Without a frame separating them from the street, Lorenza’s paintings should be understood as part of a direct action and as pieces of public art. Closer, in this sense, to performative works by other contemporaneous artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Coco Fusco, Adrian Piper, Annie Sprinkle, Beth Stephens, Guillermo Gómez Peña, and Tania Bruguera, and also to mural and street graffiti works by Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Lorenza’s pictorial works are the material vestige of an urban intervention in which the public action of the trans-crip body is as important as the final painting.

In 1984, Lorenza started taking a series of trips around Europe, but also to Chile and the United States, during which she did hundreds of “danced paintings” and numerous performances. She moved to New York with a “disabled artist” grant to study dance and performance at

New York University Steinhardt. In 1985, she presented *Lorenzas Unfall* (Lorenza's Accident, or Her fall) and *Das Leben* (Life) at New York University, as well as *Angst vor persönlichem Kontakt* (Fear of Personal Contact) in Washington Square Church. Her archives evidence an extensive index of artists' names and contact details form her time in New York. She posed, for example, as a model for Joel-Peter Witkin and Robert Mapplethorpe. These pictures, radically different from the ones that Lorenza made of herself, reinforced the exoticizing representation of her as a fantastical monster.

Petra and the Olympics of Normalization

Lorenza first visited Barcelona in the 1980s, and she established links with many of the city's artists. Through these connections, in 1992, she became Petra, the Paralympic Games mascot designed by Mariscal. Lorenza's functionally diverse body paradoxically disappeared under the character's voluminous disguise. By hiding her body and face, the Petra mascot was, in itself, infantilising and desubjectivising. But Lorenza saw in Petra the possibility of subverting disabled

identity through trans embodiment. The last public face of Lorenza, Petra was the symbol of triumph—in the last decade of the twentieth century—of postmodern diversity inclusion policies, of the charity telethon, and of the disability industries in which the functionally diverse body was included in society at the price of social submission: personal heroism, prosthetic readaptation, and athletic achievement kept the non-conforming body in a position of political subalternity. The tension between normalization and somatopolitical subversion was resolved more positively when Lorenza accepted to be the visible image of the Faber-Castell paint brand in 1992. The commercial, produced by Michael Stahlberg, showed Lorenza in a straitjacket trying to escape from a psychiatric institution by drawing a window on the wall of the cell with her feet. In the same year, Stahlberg produced the documentary *Lorenza: Portrait of an Artist*. Focusing on Lorenza's daily life as a "work of art," the film shows the close relationship between trans-crip activism and art.

After travelling extensively throughout Europe and the United States, drawing and doing performances,

Lorenza returned to Germany ailing with HIV. The last few months of her life were a destruction of the gender transition processes to which she had paid so much attention. Physically weakened and now bodily and financially dependent on her family, Lorenza—dressed as a man, her hair cut short—was re-masculinized and, for the first time, lost most of her political or artistic agency. In January 1994, at the age of 34, Lorenza died following AIDS-related complications. A pioneering critic of the hegemony of artists who "paint with their hands" and the frames of visibility in which bodies are seen as normal or pathological, Lorenza Böttner's work is now an indispensable reference for conceiving visuality in the twenty-first century.

Biographies

Lorenza Böttner was born in 1959 in Chile and assigned male at birth. At the age of eight, s/he lost both arms following an accident while climbing an electricity pylon. In 1969, Irene Böttner and her child moved to Germany for specialized treatment. While institutionalized s/he refused prosthetics and typical regimes of rehabilitation, and

turned to dancing, drawing and painting. When studying at the Gesamthochschule Kassel from 1978 to 1984, s/he changed her/his name to Lorenza and began identifying and living publicly as a woman. During her short career, Lorenza traveled through Europe, the United States where a grant allowed her to study performance and dance at New York University, Steindhardt, and returned to visit Chile. In addition to working as an artist Lorenza modeled for Joel-Peter Witkin and Robert Mapplethorpe. She played Petra, the mascot for the 1992 Paralympic Games. And she was the subject of a documentary by Michael Stahlberg and the face of a Faber-Castell paint brand commercial. She died at the age of thirty-four in 1994 following AIDS-related complications.

Paul B. Preciado is a writer, philosopher, curator and one of the leading thinkers in the study of gender and sexual politics. A Fulbright scholar he studied at the New School for Social Research in New York under Agnes Heller and Jacques Derrida. Later he obtained his doctorate in philosophy and the theory of architecture at Princeton University. Among his different assignments, he has been Curator of Public Programs of documenta 14 (Kassel/Athens), Head of Research of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona

(MACBA) and has taught Philosophy of the Body and Transfeminist Theory at Université Paris VIII-Saint Denis and at New York University. Following in the footsteps of Michel Foucault, Monique Wittig, Judith Butler and Donna Haraway he is the author of *Countersexual Manifesto* (trans. 2018)*; Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in The Pharmacopornographic Era* (trans. 2013); *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics* (2019); *An Apartment in Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing* (trans. 2020), which are key references for queer, trans and non-binary contemporary art and activism. His last book, *Can the monster speak?* will be published in English in 2021 by *Semiotexte and Fitzcarraldo.* He contributes on a regular basis to the print and online journals *Libération* and *Médiapart*. He was born in Spain and lives in Paris.