

## Drawing the Line: a Round Table on Rebecca Horn

### Introduction

This is an abridged and edited transcript of a round table that took place at the Hayward Gallery in London, on July 9, 2005, to coincide with the exhibition *Rebecca Horn Bodylandscapes: Drawings, Sculptures, Installations 1964-2004*. The participants were: Sarah Kent, art critic for *Time Out* in London, who has long been interested in Rebecca Horn's work, Joy Sleeman, senior lecturer at the Slade, University College London, who has written about Land Art and Performance Art, and is currently writing a monograph on the sculptor William Tucker, and Peg Rawes, lecturer at the Bartlett School of Architecture, also part of UCL, who is currently working on a year-long project called *Spatial Imagination in Design*. The round table was chaired by Anna Dezeuze who, at the invitation of Rebecca Heald from the Hayward Gallery, helped organise the event on behalf of the AHRC Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies.

Since this was the first show of Horn's work to bring together her drawings, sculptures and installations, the round table focused on the relation between the drawings and her other works, as well as the evolution of Horn's *oeuvre*, her poetry, and the specific characteristics of her work that emerged from the exhibition. The round table was followed by audience questions, of which a small selection has been included in this transcript. The round table and questions have been transcribed by Kerry Cundiff and edited by Anna Dezeuze.

### Round Table

#### *Bodies, Space and Drawing*

**Anna Dezeuze:** My first impression of Rebecca Horn's work, when I encountered it some years ago now, was one of incredible immediacy and accessibility. I found it quite interesting to see her

drawings, because they seem to me much less immediate, much less accessible than the installations.

**Sarah Kent:** My impressions are exactly the opposite of yours. Having seen Rebecca Horn's work here and there over the years, I've had different reactions at different times; sometimes I've found it very funny, sometimes very poignant, but I've always felt that there was something about it that I couldn't quite grasp. It seemed to me that the work was in some way empty, hollow at the core. It seems to direct attention away from itself to somewhere else. For example, in the mechanised sculptures, you are often made to wait for a long time for something to happen – for an instrument to play, for something to sprinkle or a pendulum to move. And while you're waiting and anticipating and wondering, you're in a strange state of suspended animation; and then whatever happens is always an anticlimax, it never fulfils your expectations. But seeing the large recent drawings, the *Bodylandscapes* (2003-2004), for the first time, I felt the opposite. I thought: 'Here is work that is immediate, visceral and full of vitality and energy. It's here, it's now; it's not about deferred gratification, it's about immediate interaction and intimacy.' So it's interesting that we have such different responses.

**Joy Sleeman:** I personally was struck at how sculptural the exhibition seemed as a whole. It brought to my mind the sculptor Julio Gonzalez's definition of sculpture as 'drawing in air,' which is also translated as



'drawing in space.' I think that Horn's work – both her actual drawings and the sculptural works themselves – seems to make something manifest in space in that way. Some of the sculptures, of course, are literally drawing machines.

The other link between the installations and the drawings, I felt, was the centrality of the human figure, which is something that dominates even the most abstract sculpture. In fact, Michael Fried's famous attack on minimalist sculpture, which you might think of as the most un-bodily sculpture, focuses on the blatant anthropomorphism of minimalism. Even the most abstract sculpture still has a relationship to the body.

**Peg Rawes:** I agree that there is a really interesting return to the body in this exhibition, and I am particularly interested in how you construct the body and the sense of self in space. This is where my interest in the imagination comes in. Hearing Sarah talk about this intellectual distance that a lot of Horn's work can have, reminded me of the way in which imagination, as a mental process, was written about in eighteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics as a connective principle between art processes and scientific processes. In that particular era it was really given a very strong power in linking different disciplines that are, for us now, often very removed. Horn seems to have an interest in how the imagination projects out, and I think her early prosthetic extensions to the body embody this expression of possible extensions into

space. In fact, they are almost imaginary medical prosthetics, which is very poignant, when you know about her biography at that time.

The other area that I'm interested in is how the imagination works in the construction of space as a bodily experience and in mathematics, and particularly geometry. (There's actually a very long history of geometry in relation to imagination.) I think Horn uses a very mathematical way of measuring, of constructing an aerial construction of the world, which is formally a geometric space, into something that can be bodily as well. This kind of construction seems to me to take place in her sculptures, and in the *Bodylandscape* drawings, which are very dynamic and actually quite immersive. The act of drawing these circles points to where the body is placed in relation to the drawing – at some points it is almost a projection of the body into that space – and I think that's a very performative element.

**AD:** Peg, you just hinted at the ways in which Horn's early biographical experiences influenced her sense of body and space. Sarah, could you speak more about this relation between her life and work?

**SK:** The most obvious example of course is *Cornucopia* (1970). Horn was making sculptures using fibre glass, and she and some other students at her art school got lung disease from inhaling the fibre glass, so she ended up in hospital for about a year, followed by two years in isolation,



having to live very quietly without being able to see friends or family, and having to take antibiotics until she had recovered. *Cornucopia* is almost a literal description of the trauma of that. Before she was in hospital, her sculptures were about the female body, so the drawings she made while she was lying in bed, and the sculptures she began to sew, were not so much a break as an extension of her earlier work. *Cornucopia* consists of a pair of lungs that you wear on the front of your chest; they're very odd because they connect your mouth with your nipples, as though the sculpture were a form of breathing apparatus and also a method of self-nourishment, which seems a fairly direct reflection of the fact that the artist was completely isolated and had to sustain herself in some way. I think it's the only example that is so literal; the work soon becomes much more metaphoric and symbolic. The other body extensions – claws that give you greater reach, wing-like appendages that you attach to your arms to make it appear as if you could fly, and the mask – all do two things. On the one hand, they extend your reach, literally and physically, but on the other hand they inhibit your actions. They are also quite fetishistic, and it seems to me that they are about being separate, isolated, alone, wanting to make contact with people who are not physically present, while being entrapped at the same time.

**AD:** Peg, did you also pick up on this sense of confinement in Horn's earlier work?

**PR:** Yes, but I think what interests me is the way in which geometry is mobilised in these works, so that it becomes a very material substance. It is manufactured into artefacts, little packages, portable elements. They are not art objects, they have a specific design function. But built into that notion of design, there is also some limit to what it can do, so they are transformable in one aspect, but maybe not in others.

**JS:** These early pieces are about control and the body being both extended and restrained, and this is a very specific gestural and expressive body. Henri Lefebvre makes the distinction between a fleshy body and a more expressive body, and I think that this is where Horn differs from other women artists who made work using the body in the 1970s, who seem to me to have been more concerned with the interior of the body. Eleanor Antin, for example, made a work which was called *Carving: a Traditional Sculpture*, which is her body losing weight over a period of very severe dieting. Whereas the restraint in Antin's work is imposed by not putting nourishment into your body, Horn's bodies are restrained by putting elaborate straps around them. So it seems that the body in Horn's work is very much about an expressive, extrovert kind of body. It is always externalised in some way: even when Horn's dealing with something that is to do with the body's viscera, to do with the internal workings of the body, as in *Cornucopia*, her way of working with that is to externalise it entirely.



**AD:** We were saying earlier that that's maybe one of the reasons that Horn's work is cross-gender – both men and women can wear these objects – so it doesn't seem as aligned with a feminist project in the same way the work of other 1970s body artists might be.

**SK:** Well, she made two versions of the same work: *Black Cockfeathers* (1971), for men, and *Paradise Widow* (1975) for women. The one for the woman is longer, so that the wings cover her completely, and they are motorised so that they function independently from the wearer. The pieces we have been talking about so far are attached to the body so that the wearer has to manipulate them and find a use for them, whereas the motorised pieces function independently and are autonomous. They become in that sense quite frightening, because they seem to have their own will and are like prisons (one of them is actually called *The Feathered Prison Fan* [1978]). But although the two versions of *Black Cockfeathers/Paradise Widow* are different – the male performer is in control whereas the female is trapped inside an automated cocoon – they don't seem to be gender specific. They just illustrate the moment where she moves to the next phase in her work.

**JS:** And I think that's the key moment where it moves away from sculpture too, in that it moves, which is one of the key taboos about sculpture. Traditionally, sculpture was meant to depict movement but without actually moving itself. Once

sculptures start to move themselves, they touch on that whole world of automata and Frankenstein's monster, which is part of a very problematic and quite creepy history ...

**PR:** I quite like that history! But I agree, the kinds of power that are transferred into these mechanised elements often carry a sense of brutality or conflict. It's never a straightforward celebration of an inanimate object coming to life.

**AD:** One of my problems with the drawings is precisely related to the introduction of machines in her work. Once we've seen automated machines make traces and paint, I feel we can no longer see the drawings as being spontaneous or expressive in any way. For me that really does raise questions of expression, authenticity and biography, in that one wonders not only whether these drawings are really expressive, but also whether Rebecca Horn's own body has lost all its expressivity by being identified with a mechanised automaton.

**PR:** I don't agree, because I don't construct the idea of the self and technology as separate. I personally don't see, in the way we live, this idea of us being natural and not augmented in some way by other technologies, whether it's pens or tools, or classical art materials. In fact, in the show, there's a shift from the finger, the digit, as a drawing tool, to these harpoons in later installations. The drawing instrument seems to come into all



the pieces, whether they are drawings, prosthetics, or automated sculptures.

**AD:** But the first film that you see when you walk into the exhibition is Rebecca Horn with her *Pencil Mask* (1972), and the kind of drawing that she is making there seems very repetitive, it operates as a compulsive movement which is dictated by what she is wearing as opposed to what she *wants* to draw ...

**PR:** Well, I think that that particular piece, which is very early, is much more problematic: self-expression seems to involve a very difficult psychological state. I actually find the later works far less troubled. In them, there's a sense of unity or synthesis, or an idea of the self in an immersive act, in which repetition has come to an end.

#### *Biographical Tales*

**SK:** Yes, I wonder if this is the point at which Horn shifts from making body extensions to the next stage in which the human body is replaced by surrogates such as shoes, books, instruments that play themselves, butterflies ... It's a gradual move away from the surface of the body. A recurring motif in these works is a machine of some kind on the wall, which is either a motorised brush that splashes liquid, a hammer which knocks a piece of coal or carbon, or something that shakes pigment down onto something below (the something below might be a pair of shoes, a book ...). I read a story in one of her early interviews which I find very revealing in this context. In her early childhood, she

lived with an aunt, because her parents were always away, and she was sent to boarding school. (She almost never saw her parents, so the time she spent in hospital was by no means the first time that she was alone. She was used to being alone – to longing for absent loved ones – and that permeates the work throughout, I think.) This astounding event took place when she was six years old. Her school teacher had a wooden leg – which is already surreal enough – and every day one of the kids had to come out in front of the class and say prayers. Now because her parents were away, and her Romanian nanny had never taught her how to say prayers, when it was her turn to stand out in front of the class, Horn was terrified, and she peed down her legs and onto her shoes and also onto the wooden leg of her teacher. As a punishment, she had to go home with him, carrying his heavy books. It seems to me that this explains the sprinkling on books [*Salomé* (1988)] and on shoes [*Lola - A New York Summer* (1987)]. Why, at a particular moment, she decided to move into what is in effect symbolism or metaphor, I don't know. But of course, a work like *Les Amants* (1991), in which two funnels, one filled with black ink and the other filled with pink champagne, apparently consecrate their relationship by ejaculating onto the wall and making a wall drawing, is also a spoof on Jackson Pollock and all those male artists whose testosterone-fuelled excitement created such amazing action paintings.



**AD:** If we go back to Horn's experience in the sanatorium, would you say that the body in her work is a wounded body, an ill body?

**SK:** No, I would say it was a separated body. A lot of the work is about the relationship between the body and the space around it, or one body and another body, or, in sculptural installations like *Circle for Broken Landscape* (1997), the relationship between various elements, their interconnections. In the video called *Keeping Hold of those Unfaithful Legs*, there is a man and a woman, both with orange hair and bands which contain very powerful magnets strapped around one leg. The couple spend their time coming together, locking onto one another and moving apart. What's interesting is that the person doing most of the separating is the woman – who is either Rebecca Horn herself or a stand-in for the artist. Given her childhood, I would imagine that she finds intimacy really difficult to contend with. Similarly, in *Circle for Broken Landscape*, there is one pendulum that moves in a spiral which rises and falls, and a vertical one that is static. At one point they almost touch; it's like Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling in which the fingers of God and Adam are eternally frozen at the moment just before they touch. In Horn's work, contact is often interrupted at the point at which it is almost made – whether it is between peacock feather fans in a courtship ritual [*The Raven's Twin* (1997)], or knives about to fight each other [*Knuggle Dome for James Joyce* (2004)].

**AD:** In terms of biographical narratives, one of the main points of comparison would be Joseph Beuys, of course ...

**SK:** But they are quite different. Beuys's story is that he was shot down as a pilot during the Second World War and then supposedly saved by Nomads who covered him in fat and wrapped him in felt. (In fact he was a radio operator, and when he was shot down, he was saved by a special German unit that was sent out to search for people who'd been shot down.) In nearly all his work he alludes to this narrative, and the vibrancy of his works relies on this heroic personal mythology and the ideology that he preached; without that foundation his work doesn't really seem to have the status of sculpture at all. In contrast, Rebecca Horn's works are created as sculptures and even if you know nothing about her, they still operate as sculptures. In fact she hides her autobiography, she doesn't talk about it anymore. She is keen that her work should not be seen as specific to herself and her history, she wants it to be understood in much more universal terms. Speaking to me about the *Bodylandscape* drawings, she mentioned that she meditates and that the drawings came out of that practice. They are in a sense like body maps, in that they literally refer to how far she can reach and how tall she is – they're hung low because they are in effect mirrors of her body. But when I asked her if they relate to the *shakras* on the body – because there are obviously points of concentration in the drawings and 'energy' is a word she uses all the time (in



particular psychic energy) and she has said that she perceives the human body as a part of universal energy – she wouldn't go down that road at all because it was too specific. In that respect, I think her work is almost the opposite of Joseph Beuys's.

#### *Humour and Romanticism*

**AD:** I felt the last work in the show [*Light Imprisoned Inside the Belly of a Whale* (2002)] is almost like a romantic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in that you really have the sense of the words, images, light and space really feeding into each other. And in the later works as a whole, I feel Horn's vocabulary has shifted to a more romantic, a more symbolic repertory of pens that are like snakes, and round basins that are like the moon which is like an egg, in an endless narrative of resonances. How romantic do you feel Rebecca Horn really is?

**SK:** The thing I notice most about the relationship between earlier work and *Light Imprisoned inside the Belly of a Whale* is that the sense of time is altogether different. As I mentioned, earlier pieces involve deferred gratification and a sense of anti-climax, so you are always left with a feeling of longing and a sense of not being satisfied. I found *Light Imprisoned Inside the Belly of a Whale* very soothing, it was very beautiful. You are trapped inside this body, as it were, yet the experience isn't claustrophobic, so you just relax. This must relate to the fact that Horn has taken up meditation; it implies a completely different sense of

being in the world – not longing for something or someone that is absent, but being focused in the here and now.

**PR:** I find those later works less interesting because they do seem to me to go into a universal transcendental language. In her earlier work, there seems to be an interest in cybernetic theories of the body as a point of circulation within systems or economies. There are, for example, these 1968-1969 drawings of the circulation system that's been put into tubing on the external part of the body. In contrast, the more formally symbolic pieces like the landscape with the butterfly and the mirror and the binoculars [*Circle for Broken Landscape*], seem to me less immersive than the earlier work.

And I thought *Light Imprisoned inside the Belly of a Whale* was going to be about *Moby Dick*, so I was disappointed that it revolved more around the Judeo-Christian symbolism of the biblical Jonah. There seems to be a turn to a more conventional subject matter in the *Calvary* and *Saint Sebastian* drawings [*El Calvario*, (1996-2004), *Saint Sebastian* (2004)], and I don't know if she really deals with that subject matter in such an interesting way.

**AD:** I was wondering about Horn's poetry, which is also something that this exhibition foregrounds by literally putting it on the wall. Did that shed any light on the work for you?

**JS:** I suppose one of the things that was noticeable when I walked around the



exhibition a couple of weeks ago was the point at which drawing and writing seemed to be very interchangeable. In the way that this exhibition is set up, it very much seems to be that you start with the drawings and then there is a point at which the drawings peter out and words become much more prominent, and then at the end the words are totally immersive. It does seem that there is some kind of interchangeability between the words and the drawings, but also that they serve a slightly different function. Maybe words can be more evocative, but they can also be more specific as well.

**PR:** But I don't think she's interested in the act of writing, is she? I don't think she's dealing with the trace, do you?

**JS:** Well, there are marginalia at the bottom of some of the drawings – often only a few words.

**AD:** For me the poetry displayed on the walls really emphasised Horn's strong use of images, which relate to those striking images created by her installations, which really stay in your mind. I was also quite struck by her interest in nature, which is not something that we are used to seeing in contemporary art.

**PR:** But it's a very positive part of the romantic spirit, isn't it? I think there is a problem in the way the poems have been presented in a very formal and rather grand presentation. If they had been presented as traces, or in a more process-based way, I think they wouldn't have that

sense of elevated transcendental value that they are given as commentaries.

**JS:** I suppose they make some of the work very literal in that way, don't they? The text telling the myth of the spiralling birds that disappear in the middle of the ocean seems to close down the meaning of the adjoining installation [*Spiral Bath* (1982)].

**SK:** I think we are in danger of missing one aspect of Horn's work, which is the humour, in particular the relationship between sex and humour. For example, the new piece called *Cinema Verité* (2005) consists of a large dish of water standing on the floor, a spotlight which shines an egg-shaped shadow of the water onto the wall and an egg attached to the wall with mirrors. A pointer dips until it touches a little metal disc which agitates the surface of the water to produce beautiful patterns in the reflection. As the water calms down, the reflection begins to look like a culture in a Petri dish or cells seen through a microscope; then, suddenly, you see the shadow of the pointer as a sperm penetrating the cells – so a union has been achieved, satisfaction has been reached. I think it's extremely funny that one should go to such lengths of dispassionate mechanisation to produce such an intimate story.

**PR:** She doesn't make me laugh, but I definitely think there is a shift in her romantic spirit when she moves from the energy of pain or trauma into something that's about desire in a positive sense.



**JS:** I think the most humour is probably in her films. There are some funny moments which seem to domesticate the grand themes of Surrealism. For example in Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou* there's the famous scene of an eyeball being cut, but in one of Horn's pieces [*Cutting one's hair with two pairs of scissors simultaneously* (1974-75)], she's just cutting her fringe. Or in *Un Chien andalou*, there's a scene with a piano and a donkey tied to it, but in another of Horn's films, it's just a silly little piano ... So Horn seems to make those grand surrealist narratives very domestic and ordinary and everyday, and there's something humorous about that everydayness.

### **Audience Questions**

#### *On Horn's Drawings*

**Audience:** I just wondered if you could talk a little bit more about her drawings. I personally was a little bit disappointed with them. I thought they reminded me of Cy Twombly's recent work, and I just wonder why she's used so little material on the paper.

**AD:** Well, I agree with you, my initial comparison was also Cy Twombly and that's why I wanted them to be a lot messier.

**SK:** I too thought of Cy Twombly when I saw the late drawings, and felt they were a bit pretty compared with Twombly, but what worries me more about them are their titles. I really have a problem with the references to pain and martyrdom; they weren't there in the earlier work – although

you could argue very strongly that that was what the earlier work was about. The titles seem to invite you to see the drawings almost illustratively, suggesting 'this is my bleeding heart' or 'this is where it hurts most.'

**JS:** Do you see them as therapeutic then, or even cathartic?

**SK:** No, because they are much too controlled for that.

**PR:** I didn't have that disappointment about their relation to Cy Twombly, because I think of Horn's drawings more as existing between drawings and diagrams, and I actually quite like her diagrammatic method. In terms of the construction of space and the body, there is among the earlier alchemic, prosthetic objects in the first section, a series of drawings of fan wings [including *Fan* (1970)]. In those drawings she seems to start from this Vitruvian figure of a stretched body, which suggests an architectural or built space. And the last drawings are quite interesting as plans or sections, moving into a different discipline. So maybe it's not so much about the material: it might be about what different disciplines do with drawing, and that's very interesting.

**JS:** I agree - the key is in the relation between the drawings and the sculptures. In those earlier drawings, you have a sense of drawing as a surrogate for sculpture. Then those become a bit more precise and there are measurements, so



you're actually now thinking 'this is a drawing for a sculpture.' The later drawings, for their part, are more like drawings after sculpture, like residues, bits that couldn't be put into the sculptures. There is a sense of there being some kind of taboo about drawing in a very conventional way, as if the diagrammatic style were the only style available. I'm saying this because the sculptor that I've been working on [William Tucker] said that in the 1960s there was a real taboo about sculptors drawing. When he started to draw again, he said he had to come up with ruses, like for example drawing with electrical tape on plasterboard, or drawing full scale, because that seemed somehow more sculptural. Maybe this idea of a sculptural drawing, contrasted with the romantic idea of expressive drawing, is something relevant to Horn's work as well.

#### *On the Exhibition*

**Audience:** Do you not think that the display of the early prosthetic works in wooden boxes, and the slightly odd way the drawings are scattered throughout the show, although they have only been made recently, contributes to a kind of mystification that Horn is gradually developing?

**SK:** I do. I think she was probably involved in the installation, and is trying to turn herself into a conceptualist.

**PR:** Well I like the fact that the objects have been left in their cases, because it brings out their pseudo-scientific, lab-like aspect. They are there as instruments, as

contraptions. There's a real interest in alchemy that comes through the show, with a fascination with the transformation of materials, in an almost spiritual, mystical sense, and the transformation of energy from organic or inorganic material into animate life. If they had been presented as performative body pieces, that notion of other matter, this reference to attempts to produce life in a Frankenstein-like way, would maybe not have come through.

**SK:** It's interesting that she seems to be updating her own work, so that it no longer belongs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but becomes something else. I can understand why someone would want to do that!

