

THE ACT OF SHEDDING THE SKIN

Heike Munder

"It isn't just the past. Past and present and everything – it's one world. And people from today and yesterday come together. It's all one thing. Dream and work, life and the past are together and complement one another."¹

"Why Heidi Bucher?" is the question Philip Ursprung asks me in his text. I would expand this question: "Why Heidi Bucher today?" It is because of the process-like nature of her creative work, the ludicrousness of her objects, the use of a material that is not made to last, work that can be read from a variety of perspectives depending on the phase of reception and the decade, as well as the grace and poetry that they develop. Her interest in permanent metamorphosis can give rise to many discussions, from the theme of clothing by way of architecture to the psychology of rooms and dreams; or from process-like elaboration to the discourse that introduces the time when the object exists.

Heidi Bucher modelled herself on the creative power of Jugendstil, on the poetic, sensual factor, but also more particularly on its desire to combine art and life. This was likewise a tendency among the artists who worked in the 1970s. Everyday objects became an important component of artistic works. The prime motive was to bring realpolitik into the world of art. Bucher conveyed these ideas through the representation of interior spaces - as spaces in the private and domestic sphere, as her place of working and depicting. She loaded reality with poetry and brilliance in order to remove it from true actuality. The act of transformation plays an important role in Heidi Bucher's works. The dragonfly and its act of shedding its skin stands as a symbol for her work. It is the discarding of the nymphal skin - an act of shedding as it emerges from the cocoon - and the entry into another life. It is a metamorphosis. A discarded skin remains behind as a relic of an earlier time. The cyclical shedding of the skin is a wonderful metaphor for getting rid of the past. Inherent in it is the possibility of constantly beginning anew, leaving old habits and ties behind and bringing one's history up to date in a self-determining way. Because of its elegant shape and its iridescent appearance the dragonfly was a popular form in the Jugendstil period. It replaced the image of the ungainly vocabulary of form, overshadowing it by means of its organic forms and curving lines.

Textiles

"Women keep cropping up in your works again and again, particularly all those fabrics!..." –

"Yes they fall into the work like poetry. I, and by that I really mean we, all women, have a quite primeval relationship to textiles.

You see, we've made it all ourselves. And then the trousseau and all that. We're constantly dealing with fabrics.

They surround us, envelop us, they're our skin. That's what we are. We as a whole...."²

In the mid-1970s Heidi Bucher began to dip old underwear, shirts and aprons into latex, so removing from them their capacity to serve as garments. She transformed these tools used to cover the female and male body into an almost smooth pictorial surface. The rubbery milky fluid she used as a fixative is a naturally white liquid which in its dry state becomes harder and harder, as well as darker and darker. It begins to resemble the colour of the skin and also, because of its suppleness resembles a second skin. The process of coating with latex acts as a conserving process – perhaps similar to the preserving of insects in synthetic resin. But what is the effect of the conservation process? Is it a recording of memories of a period extending from the 1920s to the 1950s? A period that is associated with strictly patriarchal relationships and draconian domestic punishments involving chastisement. A past that people were trying to shake off in the 1960s and 1970s in order to develop a new self-confidence.

Heidi Bucher's ancestral period can rarely be simply laid aside either, and requires a certain humour to be "mastered". One way that this is expressed in her work is through repetition. In the 1975 work *Ot-to-to-to-to-to* she laid five men's shirts on top of one another, one behind the other, fixed them with latex and painted them an iridescent color – the outcome is an exaggerated form of the masculine superego that develops ad infinitum.

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1 Heidi Bucher in "Gespräche in der Küche", 19.4.1978. Galerie Haus 11, Karlsruhe
2 Ibid.

Another series of objects seems to freeze the traditional roles ascribed to mother and child in the family. One image of this is *La Mamma*, 1977, a blanket with a woman's and a child's undergarment lying on it, which she has likewise coated with the rubber substance and painted. She expanded these images by integrating shellfish and other fish in the picture, which as living creatures from the sea or fresh water, are symbolic references that will turn up again and again in Bucher's work.

Architecture

"...For example the nightdress: the nightdress and woman are closely connected. From there I go on to think about the space in which the woman lives, and then I make a room. I go on to think about the house surrounding the room and the woman. It forms the connection and then I in fact make a house."³

Almost at the same time, Heidi Bucher expanded her works from the immersion of clothes into the latex mass to a process of skinning that she used on furniture, on windows and doors, and on whole rooms.

Heidi Bucher peeled her way through the houses of her past: the *Borg* (1974-1977), her studio in Zurich during the 1970s, the study at her parents' house *Herrenzimmer* (1977-1979) and the house of her ancestors *Ahnenhaus* (1980-1982) in Winterthur. She also went through historical buildings such as the *Grande Albergo* (1987) in Brissago, Bellevue psychiatric clinic *Bellevue* (1988) in Kreuzlingen near Lake Constance or *Villa Bleuler* (1991), which now houses the Swiss Institute for Art History. Heidi Bucher applied first fabric, then latex to the walls, ceilings and floors and detached them as one.

In the early 1970s when Heidi Bucher returned from the United States, she moved into an old butcher's shop in Weinbergstrasse in Zurich. She used the basement as a studio, where the cold store she called the *Borg* was also located. She made a latex casting of this *Borg*, a tiled room. It became her first "room skin" and hence her first three-dimensional object. The skinning of rooms is an act of cleansing them of traces of the past.

By way of contrast, the study in her parents' house in Winterthur, which was built c. 1900, was a typically middle-class room, with heavy wood panelling decorating the walls and an oak parquet floor. It was a room in which her father's huge collection of weapons was exhibited. She allowed the peeled-off skin to float in exhibition areas, endowing the heavy room with its implicit family past with lightness. She undertook another family skinning in the house of her ancestors which was also in Winterthur. There she worked systematically according to a predetermined plan, peeling her way from room to room. She arranged for one of the skinned rooms to fly through the air suspended from a crane, a process that left the weight of the room behind. It was a successful attempt to delocalise a room or its 25 square metre counterpart and give it the freedom of flight. She arranged for another room skin that she had taken from her ancestral home to be put into a nearby building-site excavation. The earth was furrowed like the earth in a Zen garden, so letting the room with its history come symbolically to rest. Another work from the ancestral home was the skinning of the floor of the long corridor in the entrance hall. This resulted in a skin tenmetreslong with all the indentations which the tiles left behind. After making the skinning she hung it from the flagpole of the house like a trophy and let it flutter there like an animal's entrails.

Many parts of what is peeled off look like a direct replica of the original, though in the process of removing them traces of wood, plaster and colour pigments come away with them – the traces of use and wear over many years and generations. What is left behind is a house "cleansed" of the traces of the past. One way of interpreting the skins would be to see them as an analogy for the way reptiles shed their skins. Metaphorically the process of cyclical renewal can be transposed to the human psyche and becomes a deliberate act of transformation, with the recognition that there is not just one skin, but many layers that have to be discovered and revealed. In architecture this revelation has another meaning. Since the time of Alfred Loos the removal of ornamentation and the laying bare of construction have been seen as part of the architecture of the modern era. In the case of houses it is the renovation of the façade; in the case of people it is the act of changing their clothes, which proves to be difficult when one's own skin feels too tight. The writer Franz Kafka described this in the negative sense through the process of aging, through being imprisoned in one's old skin as a garment that characterises one throughout one's life and cannot be discarded. Instead of the possibility of putting on a new garment it turns into an increasingly uncomfortable straitjacket. But we are still with the comparison of the house as memory, or as the container of family histories extending over generations. This would mean that the act of skinning only describes one moment, or just one layer of the emancipation from history, and the process would have to be repeated again and again until all traces were eradicated. Thus the process of skinning is also a process of appropriation through all the layers of patina and as a result the opportunity to free oneself of the past. The house can be occupied anew and can write a new history. But what happens to the peeled-off skins which bear the traces of the past like tattoos? Does the work in itself imply a processual character comparable with works by Gordon Matta-Clark or Rachel Whiteread, where the transformation of the house is also a dominant theme? If we were dealing with a process, then the result would be secondary, but Heidi Bucher catalogued and labelled all the skins, with the labels sometimes giving instructions about the hanging. Thus the houses turned into a "matter-of-fact" archaeology of personal histories. Yet this too has limits as regards durability, for as we now know latex, because of its aging process as a material, cannot be kept forever. Its consistency and colour alter as a result of the influence of light and changes in the air. Today the peeled-off skins of the rooms look like old sloughed-off skins. This raises the question of whether Heidi Bucher actually produced these works to last, or whether they were much more

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important to her for the moment and a limited period of time. Likewise the question arises of how far the skinning process itself was also an important component of the work. For Heidi Bucher consistently had that process documented. The documentation is no longer just a record, but also an important constituent of the act of transformation.

Dreams about rooms and water

"I show everything (...) quite joyfully, in an exaggerated way.
Everything is intended to have a sheen. Mother-of-pearl is my good fortune."⁴

Heidi Bucher sought out locations that were "occupied", that represented places of transformation and refuge. The *Bellevue* psychiatric clinic in Kreuzlingen near Lake Constance or the *Grande Albergo* in Brissago in Ticino can serve as examples of this. At the clinic she skinned the bathroom, a tiled, open, round room with a small pool equipped with countless instruments in the middle of it. It is a practical room allowing observation of all those who use it. And it is a psychologically occupied space that represents control and the exercise of power in the sense meant by Foucault: a place where the human being is naked, reduced to his skin and exposed to total surveillance. Bucher chose the instrument "control station" for her skinning action, so conserving the traces.

Heidi Bucher worked on the *Grande Albergo* in 1987 when it was already standing empty. It is an old grand hotel, which had a lively history during the Second World War, housing refugees from every country. The hotel became famous for the fact that the intelligentsia of Europe found refuge there, and several interesting meetings came about. There Heidi Bucher symptomatically skinned the imposing entrance doors which promised a place of shelter. In his analysis of dreams Freud refers to the symbolism of windows, doors and rooms. In his work dreams about houses are interpreted as dreams about one's own body. According to Freud, the house even stands for the only representation of the human individual as a whole.⁵ In this connection Freud asserts an analogy with the female genitals and the womb, if they "enclose a hollow space which can take something into itself: ... pits, cavities and hollows, for instance, vessels and bottles, receptacles, boxes, ... cases, ... pockets.... Or cupboards, stoves and especially rooms would be related to the womb. Here room-symbolism touches on house-symbolism; again doors and gates become symbols of the genital orifice."⁶

Bucher had a predilection for vessels, which included the concept of the room as a vessel, as well as cupboards, drawers and vases. The psychology of houses and their materiality seems to have driven Bucher on, only to transport her ultimately to a level of the absurd. This indicates both her distance from the topic and her humour. The house as a shell that can be brought to life seems to have had its origins as far back as the 1970s when she produced *Bodyshells* and – in collaboration with her then husband, Carl Bucher – *Landings to Wear* in California, which were based on his *Landings*. The *Bodyshells* were sculptures made of foam the outsides of which had mother-of-pearl rubbed into them. The use of mother-of-pearl, an iridescent material extracted from the shells of molluscs, allowed the soft sculptures to turn into peculiar garments hovering between modernist architecture, the idea of a garment and strange living creatures reminiscent of outsize mussels and polyps from the sea. Heidi Bucher arranged for them to move across Venice Beach near L.A and be photographed in 1971. It seems to symbolise the act of giving birth on land by sea creatures. And in his interpretation of dreams Freud did not forget how the predecessors of human beings evolved from water creatures, and that every mammal, every human being has experienced the first phase of its existence in its mother's womb filled with amniotic fluid.⁷

The theme of water (*Die Wässer*) remained a silent companion on into the 1980s. As well as using small pictures of shells and fish as a signature, she began to form a series of water objects that could be described as still-lives: *La Chute de l'Espoir* (The Fall of Hope), 1986 is a jardinière as a piece of furniture, a vase and a pool of water which is spreading over the floor – made from latex and coloured with pigments. *Jetzt fliesst das Wasser aus der Vase* (Now the water is running out of the vase), also dating from 1986, is a vase which is pouring water down on to the floor from a height - six metres high in all. Or there is *Eiswasser* (1986), likewise made from a rubbery milky fluid with blue pigment, which decorates the wall as a blue waterfall. These objects have a simple grace about them that emphasizes Heidi Bucher's interest in the object in itself, and beyond that in the creative object, and not only in the transformational element of the process. In these works she was influenced by the Arts & Crafts movement from England, at that point hardly taken seriously, which positively celebrating ornament and craft.

In *Libellenlust* (Dragonfly joy), a series of works dating from between 1976 and 1983, Heidi Bucher achieved the process of transformation or even self-realisation. The dragonfly as a light, iridescent, enchanting creature that is associated with water and seems to hover above all worlds fascinated Bucher. In the analysis of dreams the dragonfly is equated with the need for freedom, but also with the idea that freedom can only be short-lived. The dragonfly is regarded as a symbol for excessive egocentricity and indicates to the person dreaming that he is too easily taken in by outward appearances. But the dragonfly also symbolises of inspiring imaginative power; it represents the beauty of the spirit and above all immortality too, through the capacity for renewal.

Bucher created various versions of *Libellenlust*, the most outstanding being the dragonfly costume that puts the wearer into the position of being potentially able to metamorphose. The other version that Bucher created is the mask that was intended to be held in front of the face, as at balls in the rococo period. All these dragonflies had mother-of-pearl rubbed into them. As a symbol of transformation they also allow the process of the skinning

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4 Ibid.
5 Sigmund Freud, *Studienausgabe*, vol. 1., p. 162, 14th corrected edition, Frankfurt am Main 1969.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.

of houses to be seen in a different light. The poet Heinrich Heine knew that the brilliance is only short-lived and is a dazzling surface:

“Es tanzt die schöne Libelle
Wohl auf des Baches Welle;
Sie tanzt daher, sie tanzt dahin,
Die schimmernde, die flimmernde Gauklerin”⁸

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Link to exhibition:

http://www.migrosmuseum.ch/en/exhibitions/exhibition-details/?tx_museumplus%5Bexhib%5D=72&cHash=6b4dad2f16c8377dc6eab3067e0a768c

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⁸ Heinrich Heine, *Gedichte*, S. 530, Berlin und Weimar, 1988. English Translation: The beautiful dragonfly dances - On the ripples of the brook; -It dances now this way now that, - The shimmering, scintillating illusionist.