

INTERIORS— HEIDI BUCHER AND THE FRAGILE ROOMS

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Upon her death in 1993 Heidi Bucher suddenly disappeared from the art world's memory. It was not that she was more "at peace", as people usually say in such cases, she was surrounded by total silence. The fact that Heike Munder is initiating discussion of Heidi Bucher's work today, a decade later, raises some questions. Why was Bucher's work forgotten? Are we dealing with an act of suppression by the art world? Is it connected with the fact that the objects are very unwieldy, that they consist of fragile, now partly damaged latex skins that are very difficult to install? Is it because they cannot be reproduced well? And what makes the work topical of today? Can we see it in a new light? Has it changed? Does it still live on?

It would be easy to assume that the disappearance of Bucher's work from the memory of the art world could be explained by the fact that her works of art were inseparably bound up with her as a person, with her demeanour, her capacity to get things done. And it is in fact striking that most of the articles about Bucher's art published in the 1970s and 1980s are closely focused on her biography. However, this phenomenon is true of many 1970s artists, from Joseph Beuys to Gordon Matta-Clark, from Jean Tinguely to Bruce Nauman, from Judy Chicago to Ana Mendieta. This may have to do with the fact that the art world was much smaller then than that it is today. It may be linked to the central significance of the human body and the performance aspect of the art of that period. But it may also be connected with the fact that critics and history writers lacked the concepts to describe that art adequately, and therefore, almost as a prop, placed the perpetrators of the art in the foreground, whether they transfigured or suppressed them, adulated or decried them. In other words, focusing on the biographies of the artists of that period is connected less in the structure of the works of then with the inability of art historians to describe them.

In what follows I will therefore deliberately leave Heidi Bucher's personality out of the picture and ask how her works of art can be linked to the culture of the 1970s. Is it possible for us to gain a better understanding of that period, which is slowly beginning to take shape in historical retrospect through Bucher's works of art? I am starting from the assumption that Bucher's most important workshave their roots in this period, and that she discovered the motifs and forms of the art which made her famous in those years. havewere created in that period. The large-format *Bodyshells* she made in California and exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1972 form the prelude (Fig. 1.). These are a group of foam sculptures that the performers, including Bucher's two sons and her husband Carl, wore as costumes. The sculptures themselves have not been preserved. But a film shows a performance on Venice Beach where the *Bodyshells* move to and fro, hopping and circling round one another playfully. Because the sculptures are really large and ungainly, the movements seem muffled, decelerated, almost as if in slow motion. Inspired bythe *Landings* of Carl Bucher, Heidi Bucher realised along with her husband the *Landings to Wear*, worn on the body like clothes – they made it onto the front cover of *Harper's Bazaar* – they explore the complex spatial relationship between the human body and its surroundings (Fig. 2). The shells envelop and protect human bodies like cocoons. They encapsulate them, seeming to intercept vibrations and muffle the relationship between the human figures and their surroundings. Who knows whether iridescent insects will ultimately emerge from the pupae?

The roots of globalisation

Like many artists of her generation Bucher was as much at home in the American art world as in the European one. Thus the *Bodyshells* would have been inconceivable without the large-format sculptures of Pop Art and Minimal Art, without the happenings and performances of the 1960s. And at the same time they demonstrate a predilection for the ludicrous that has its roots in the spatial concepts of Surrealism. Bucher's *Bodyshells* and the *Wrappings* exhibited a year later are, emblematic of the mood prevalent in the America in the early 1970s (Fig. 3). In the wake of the economic recession, the oil crisis, the political shock of Watergate and the devastating war in Vietnam, society too changed at that time. In simple terms, there was a withdrawal into the private sphere. The earlier pioneering atmosphere gave way to concern for the future. Instead of travelling to open-air concerts lasting several days like Woodstock, young people went to discos at the weekend. Instead of "new frontiers" politicians spoke about "stagflation". The two most successful films of the decade, *Jaws* and *Saturday Night Fever*, also deal with fear and the withdrawal into the private sphere.¹

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1 Cf. to cultural history of the Seventies Stephen Paul Miller, *The Seventies Now, Cultures as Surveillance*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1999.

Can it be that the halting dance which the *Bodyshells* executed on the shores of the Pacific, where the westward settlement came to an end, is a commentary on the fact that American society, after two decades of almost unbounded expansion, had come up against the limits of growth at the beginning of the 1970s? Can it be that they are images for that sudden switch to the private, the individual, that characterises western societies to this day and goes along with the globalisation process which started at that time? Or are they only catching breath for a new beginning, a new opening?

Of course Bucher's sculptures are more than shallow illustrations of this altered state of affairs. But the elastic, yielding spatiality which Bucher achieves in her performances and sculptures, her exploration of the boundaries between the individual bodies and their surroundings, corresponds to the social shift that took place at the time between the private and the public spheres. Richard Sennett has provided a theoretical definition of this process in *The Fall of Public Man—On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (1977). Art revolved round the themes of drawing boundaries. Environmental art, installation, ambience are the catchwords. Artists like Joseph Beuys, Gordon Matta-Clark, Dan Graham, Mario Merz, Vito Acconci and Ed Kienholz, with whom the Buchers had ties of friendship, make deep inroads into the field of architecture. Women artists like Ana Mendieta, Christiane Möbus and Rebecca Horn concern themselves with the themes of swathing the human body and the imprint made by it (Fig. 4). Designers such as Gaetano Pesce – for instance his *Mama* armchair which plunged those using it into a soft mould – demonstrate that the themes of muffling and wrapping apply to all domains of culture.

Historical space

What may be regarded, in my view at least, as Heidi Bucher's masterpiece directly followed the *Bodyshells* and *Body Wrappings*, namely the shedding *Herrenzimmer* (1977–79). While in the *Bodyshells* the future, play, children, projection—the utopian space—are at the forefront, the *Herrenzimmer* deals with the past, with congealment, parents, memory—with historical space. Bucher produced the work in several variations when she was already over 50, after her return to Switzerland and her divorce. She used latex to make a casting on to material of the wall panelling in the study of her parents' upper middle-class home in Wülflingen. The translucent latex skins were then installed in such a way that the late 19th-century room was evoked in a spectral way, as a reminiscence and yet as something physically tangible. The *Herrenzimmer* attracted international attention in the context of the *Weich und plastisch —SOFT ART* exhibition held at the Kunsthaus Zürich in 1980 (Fig. 5).

One could speculate as to whether only someone who has lived in another country for quite a long time is in the position to perceive and depict the traces of suppressed historical processes in his or her own country—in Bucher's case in German-speaking Switzerland. The extent to which Bucher's work involves an almost archaeological establishing of traces becomes clearest in the photographs of her intervention at the church on 21st Street in New York in 1979 (Fig. 6). No less a person than Hans Namuth who made his name by photographing and filming Jackson Pollock took these pictures. They show the artist kneeling on the floor in the process of making a moulding of details of the mosaic floor. "I have to get closer to everything," she once said.² Namuth's pictures capture the mood of that time. It was a phase when the metropolis was on the verge of financial collapse, and at times was threatening to suffocate in rubbish and under the pressure of the property crisis. At the same time it was the point at which the adaptation of old buildings for a new use started to be discussed, industrial archaeology came into existence as a discipline in its own right, and the general public was alerted to the finite nature of resources, natural or manmade. Like many artists Bucher took up the cause of what was in danger of disappearing, of the material signs of an architectural substance that was under constant threat.

Bucher was then one of the few artists in Switzerland to undertake the study of historical space, which makes her work all the more significant from the standpoint of today. Thus, for present-day observers, aspects which may not even have been seen twenty years ago become central. Whereas those viewing it then experienced the *Herrenzimmer* directly and could get a sensory impression of the aura of the material with coloured vestiges of the panelling still adhering to it, the latex skins have meanwhile become discoloured and fragile. From our present perspective, the photographs showing Bucher in the process of making the work become crucially important.

The black and white photographs documenting the production of the various versions of the *Herrenzimmer* and showing the moment when the impression made in the latex skin was torn away from the original architecture, contain the tension that makes the work explosive. They suggest that the object is only one part of a performance process. They show the artist who is attacking the architecture of her parents' house, or to be more precise an interior, but without damaging it. The work requires strength but does not seem to be unpleasant. She handles the material half aggressively, half playfully, winding it round her own body until she disappears into it.

In his groundbreaking exhibition catalogue "L'Empreinte" (1997) Georges Didi-Huberman has explained how the technique of taking the imprint makes historical processes visible. He also reminds readers that the technique of taking mechanical impressions had been overshadowed by artistic innovation for decades, indeed for centuries.³ Didi-Huberman takes the logic of the imprint as an excuse to sketch out an alternative history of modernism leading to the post-modernistic art of the 1980s and 1990s via artists like Duchamp. Didi-Huberman's exposition is only one of many attempts to revise the canon of the history of art in very recent times. The reassessment of Gottfried Semper, which likewise started tentatively in the 1970s, no

² Heidi Bucher, *Häutungen*, Villa Bleuler, photographed by Jean Pierre Kuhn, Galerie im Weissen Haus, Winterthur, 1993, unpaginated.

³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung, Archäologie, Anachronismus und Modernität des Abdrucks*, Cologne, Dumont, 1999 (primarily: *L'Empreinte*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997).

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doubt also belongs in this context. Semper's "Bekleidungsprinzip" (principle of adornment) dating from the 19th century, according to which there is a close connection between architecture and clothing, can in turn be made to refer to Bucher's work.⁴ Bucher would doubtless have been familiar with Semper's ideas. Indeed, she made a quite explicit reference to him in one performance. A group of performers carried the *Hautraum* (Skinning of a room), which had been peeled off the house of her forebears in Winterthur through the town and in so doing processed past one of Semper's masterpieces, the Stadthaus completed in 1870 (Fig. 7).

The 1982 photograph showing the artist with symmetrically torn away latex skins has impressed me most (Fig. 8). She appears to be slipping into the peeled-off skins of the interior as through into the sleeves of a coat that has got too big.⁵ The latex skins hold her half imprisoned, yet she is half lent wings by them, like the figure of an angel with huge shimmering wings. She is half entangled in the texture of the past, and half carried by it. Like very few other artists of her generation she thus makes it clear how strongly the human body remains bound up with architectonic reality, and how memories, obsessions, dreams are materialised in the surface of interior spaces. She duplicates the reality of the interior, but neither as an abstractive, simplifying representation, nor as a symbolisation that heightens reality. The duplication remains dialectically linked to the reality, and in turn becomes a physical reality in its own right. It is not a detached image, but a substance that can in turn generate images. And not least the work demonstrates how social standards are fixed in the conventions of architecture across the generations. Even if very few any architect would specify a *Herrenzimmer* [literally "gentlemen's or master's study"] in a plan for a new house today, everyone knows what it means. The family hierarchies imposed in the 19th century still continue to leave their mark on our language, our conventions and the spatial organization of our buildings.

Bucher's rooms record this ambivalence. They represent fragility and at the same time embody it. Like her small-format objects, they are always coated with an iridescent sheen that makes her works unmistakable. It comes from the use of nacreous pigments. It is a sheen that has made pearls so precious since time immemorial because it embodies the most subtle accretion of deposits and makes the course of time apparent. The iridescent layers of colour had already fascinated the artist craftsmen of the Jugendstil or Art Nouveau, from Emile Gallé to Tiffany, and the aesthetics of that period only came back into fashion in the 1970s. The sheen coats the objects with a layer that neither reflects a mirror image nor absorbs light. It allows the artist to prevent the objects from being assimilated again and again, to keep them at a distance.

This sheen – in the concrete and metaphorical sense—currently covers a number of phenomena from the 1970s. It envelops the objects, altering them depending on the standpoint we adopt. We cannot know how long this sheen will last. It is an aura that makes us curious, and prompts us to make ourselves open to it. For many years we were unable to detect that aura. Today it is once again vivid, offering us the opportunity to see things differently.

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Link to the exhibition:

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

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⁴ Cf. Michael Gnehm, *Stumme Poesie, Architektur und Sprache bei Gottfried Semper*, Zurich, gta publishers, 2004.

⁵ The parallels with the interest of architectural theory in the relationship between architecture and clothing in the 19th century are obvious. Cf. Karin Harather, *Haus-Kleider: Zum Phänomen der Bekleidung in der Architektur*, Vienna, Böhlau, 1995. I would like to thank Bettina Köhler for the information she supplied.

Images



Fig.1. Heidi Bucher, *Body Shells*, 1972



Fig.2. Carl Bucher, *Landing S6*, 1972



Fig.3 A, Harper's Bazaar, Cover with *Landings to Wear*, 1966. Cooperation Carl Bucher & Heidi Bucher

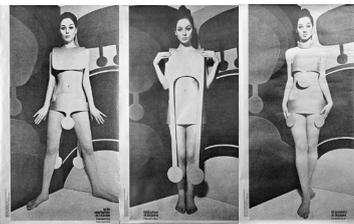


Fig.3 B. Advertisement with *Landings to Wear*, 1966. Cooperation Carl Bucher & Heidi Bucher



Fig.3 C. *Landings to Wear*, 1971. Cooperation Carl Bucher & Heidi Bucher



Fig.4. Heidi Bucher, *Wrappings*, 1973



Fig.5. Ana Mendieta, *Birth*, 1982



Fig.6. Heidi Bucher, *Herrenzimmer*, exhibition view «Weich und plastisch – Soft Art», Kunsthaus Zürich, 1980



Fig.7. Heidi Bucher, *21st. Street*, New York, 1979

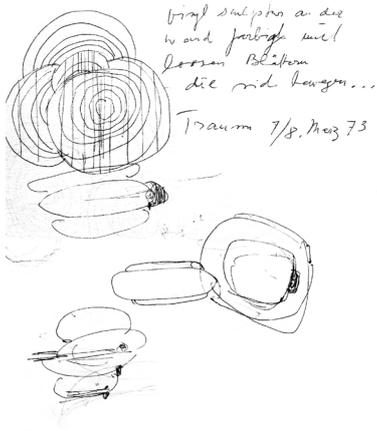


Fig.8. Heidi Bucher *Hautraum* in front of the Stadthaus Winterthur by Gottfried Semper, film still *Ablosrauswegfliegling* by Martin Kugler, 1982.

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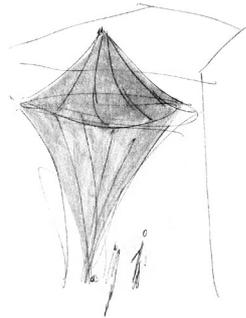
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Heidi Bucher, *Bodyshells*, Skizze, ca. 1972



Abb. 9. Heidi Bucher, working process, *Herrenzimmer*, ca. 1977-1978



Heidi Bucher, *Bodyshells*, Skizze, ca. 1972

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