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Lorenza Böttner: Requiem for the Norm

January 25–March 21, 2020

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Lorenza Böttner: Requiem for the Norm

Lorenza Böttner: Requiem for the Norm is the first North American presentation of the work of Chilean/German artist Lorenza Böttner. Born Ernst Lorenz Böttner in Chile in 1959, at eight he lost both his arms in an accident. Institutionalized in Germany, where he moved with his mother for treatment, he rejected prosthetics intended to compensate for his supposed disability. In art school, he started identifying as female and assumed the name Lorenza. Although her career spanned just sixteen years, Lorenza Böttner created over 200 individual works, painting with her feet and mouth and using dance, photography, street performance, drawing, and installation to celebrate the complexity of embodiment and gender expression. Casting herself as a ballerina, a mother, a young man with glass arms, a Greek statue, Böttner's work is irreverent and hedonistic, filled with the artist's joy in her own body.

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Curated by Paul B. Preciado

Credits

The exhibition is presented in collaboration with Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart and La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, Barcelona.

We gratefully acknowledge operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council. The production of the exhibition was funded by Kulturstiftung des Bundes, Germany, with additional project support from the Goethe-Institut Toronto, the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, and the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto.

Exhibition Essay

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. Her 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, 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

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, Ernst Lorenz Böttner Oeding was assigned male at birth. At the age of eight, Ernst Lorenz 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, Ernst Lorenz underwent a long, painful process of hospitalization, during which he attempted suicide. In 1969, his mother took him to Germany to access specialized therapies alongside to the so-called “thalidomide children.” Victims of the errors of pharmacological industry, at once socially rejected and spectacularized by the media, these children were the material signifier of the pharmaco-pornographic 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. Ernst Lorenz rejected the prosthetic arms that would supposedly have rehabilitated his body into one deemed “normal”; he rejected being educated as a disabled child and spent most of his time drawing, painting, and dancing. This 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, Ernst Lorenz 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 Ernst Lorenz changed his 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: 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. She 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 social 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. Lorenza sought to inscribe her body, her subjectivity, and her artistic production in a political lineage of armless painters such as Aimée Rapin, whose work became an attraction 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. Instead, she 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

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. 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

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. Mouth- and foot-painting artists are forced to paint 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 and another that comes from introducing the presence of the subaltern body within representation. 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. 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 normalising 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

In the same decade 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 transcrip 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 from 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 1990s—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.

—Paul B. Preciado, Guest Curator

About the Curator

Paul B. Preciado is a philosopher, writer, curator, and trans activist. His work considers biopolitics and sexuality, looking at the ways technology and pornography have shaped how we think about gender in the twentieth century. He has written about Playboy, architecture, and sexuality in the 1960s (*Pornotopia*, 2014); used his experiences taking testosterone to examine the business of desire and the pharmaceutical industry's role in expanding our definitions of gender (*Testo Junkie*, 2013); and invited his readers to relinquish ideas about "natural" gender, sign a countersexual contract, and embrace the possibilities offered by the prosthesis (*Countersexual Manifesto*, 2002).

Preciado is the Curator of Public Programmes for documenta 14, where he first presented Böttner's work.

Events and Programming

Opening Event

Reception

Saturday, January 25, 5-7pm

University of Toronto Art Centre

Weekly Drop-In Tours

Exhibition Tours

Tuesdays, 2pm

Meet at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Malcove Collection Tour

Last Wednesday of each month, 12 noon

University of Toronto Art Centre

Hart House Collection Tour

Last Wednesday of each month, 2pm

Meet at the Hart House information desk

Group tours may be booked by contacting us
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University of Toronto Art Centre

15 King's College Circle

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| Tuesday | Noon–5pm |
| Wednesday | Noon–8pm |
| Thursday | Noon–5pm |
| Friday | Noon–5pm |
| Saturday | Noon–5pm |
| Sunday | Closed |
| Monday | Closed |

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