

Heidi Bucher: A Work Illuminated by the Senses

Does the cosmic space in which we dissolve taste of us?

Rainer Maria Rilke¹

In my opinion, it does.

I. The sense of something coming

I went to London to meet Alexander Tarakhovsky – it was the winter of 2009. His research on how cells respond to environmental stresses and how these responses are able to affect our genes fascinated me so much that I wanted to meet him in person. Only now, as I sat there waiting in a café, was I able to rationally justify my interest in meeting him. We recognised each other immediately, and the smile he gave me was both confident and reassuring. Generations of patient-doctor relationships have no doubt conditioned the two of us to act in a certain way so that we're able to establish trust in a matter of seconds. As if in a doctor's surgery, I began to mumble something about my case. With a very friendly and charming wave of the hand, he made it clear that he wanted me to stop. "I'm not at all surprised by your coming to see me! On the contrary. For years now, I've been asking myself how long it will be before someone from the arts contacts a scientist who's interested in the logic and nature of our adaptive response to the world." As he said these words, he looked at me as if I were a messenger and a new world were about to start.

Tarakhovsky's most important discovery is the identification of the antibody repertoire formation and T cell signalling (fig. 1). The T cells are key to a new understanding of human immune responses and, of course, to the development of vaccines against a virus such as Covid-19. He began by saying that everything expressed in the words of poets, every intuition about how our organs – from our stomach to our skin – have revealed the world to us, is true. And that he became a scientist because, as a young man in Russia, it had been his good fortune to have the friendship of the Moscow poet and literary scholar Alexei Parshchikov. It was Parshchikov's view that science and history extrapolate our experience into transhuman spheres of knowledge, and only poetry can give us an experience of the real, images and experiences that make us understand the true logic of our relation with the real without the fragmentation produced by science. Tarakhovsky immediately proceeded to explain to me that his main motivation over the years had been to prove that we do feel with our guts. That all that had been said about intuition, all the sentiments expressed by writers and poets for centuries, had in fact been the result of a collective description and acknowledgement of a complex and crucial understanding of the human mind in a permanent relation with all the cells and organs that make up our body. Indeed, his research and many others proved that the gut also contains intrinsic primary afferent neurons – in other words, that there is a direct connection between our digestive system and our brain. Cells respond to our experiences, and those experiences leave behind a trace in them. Cells have a memory, and those memories are able to alter the ordinary functioning of cells.

How, then, can we banalise art?" – he asked. If experience is our hope for escape from all reductionist theories and genetic interpretations, our hope for a more cosmic, more complex understanding of humans: how, then, can art not be a fundamental element for the natural sciences? Or how can the function of science to protect and preserve centuries of poetry and art, and translate it into another language, lend voice to our senses?

II. The intelligence of shells

It is with this question in mind that I approach the work of Heidi Bucher.

In January of 1832, Charles Darwin spotted a horizontal band of compressed seashells and corals thirty feet above sea level. The whole area looked as if it had once been under water. “Why not now?” He thought about a recently published book he had brought along with him: the first volume of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, in which the Scottish geologist suggested that the Earth was gradually and continuously changing, with land rising in one area, falling in another.

What Darwin saw before him seemed to be direct confirmation of Lyell’s theory. In 1972, Heidi Bucher realised a series of sculptural works titled *BodysHELLs*, which she activated on Venice Beach, California (figs. 2 and 3; figs. pp. ##–##). She had been interested in clothes and fashion before, in movement and in how the way we dress transforms our body, both in its external perception and the way we perceive it (figs. 4 and 5). These shells are definitely dresses – dresses that aspire to house bodies we cannot see. The works appear to be a philosophical interpretation of a shell: a large casing, slightly bottle-shaped ... these shell-vessels, created by a human, inspired by the sea, address the same questions raised by Darwin. Two worlds biologically separated and two times – human time and geological time – reunited. These structures are called shells because shells are made of a marvellous substance: mother-of-pearl. The artist did some drawings using mother-of-pearl (fig. 6; figs. pp. ##–## and ##–##). Living in Los Angeles, it is easy to imagine her walks along the beach, collecting shells and wondering about their colours, their strength. Mother-of-pearl, or nacre, is a strong material with a very particular trait: iridescence. This iridescent material is the innermost layer of the shell, present only to the animal living inside – a coat of glossy and silky matter beneath the rough surface of the shell. However, Heidi Bucher’s *BodysHELLs* are neither rough nor solid nor strong. Why are the real shells so different from her *BodysHELLs*?

It has recently been discovered that nacre is as resistant as concrete and that, like plastic, it can return to its original form if damaged, without losing its resistance. A shell has very particular structural peculiarities. It is composed of tightly packed aragonite crystals held together by proteins. These crystals are like tiny bricks whose complex disposition is also the origin of the beautiful colours we see. If these materials were completely smooth, we would see a plain – probably boring brown – colour. No wonder, then, that the forms created by Heidi Bucher were unable to replicate the shells. Actually, it was never her intention to do so. Her shells serve more as an ode-cum-manifesto: an ode to the simple sculptures one finds in nature, autonomous forms of life able to preserve and take care of organisms, durable and eternal, as is the dream of art; but also a manifesto, a way to express the complex and associative relationship between the depiction of women’s bodies and the history of art. We are all familiar with the image of Venus standing on a shell, and the oft-repeated associations between the female genitalia and shells. As a major producer of images, art history has not been indifferent to that bond. It is only fair to ask how women feel about such images, about this pairing of forms, about the “motherhood” of shells, which “give birth” to pearls, so to speak.

Heidi Bucher’s *BodysHELLs* may be an unconscious response to shame. The shells are exoskeletons that allow its inhabitants – the women-clams – to move, live and act without their bodies being revealed. Unlike the *Venus* of Sandro Botticelli, the women inside Heidi Bucher’s shells do not need hair to cover their exposed bodies, none of which, in fact, are

normally shaped. But even if they no longer resemble human female creatures, they may still feel vulnerable and exposed, given the images and practices pointing towards their genitalia in previous centuries. One thing is obvious: the bodies inside the shells on Venice Beach must be soft and vulnerable – or why else would they need shells? But why should we imagine them as human bodies? Simply because we know they are activated by dancers. But forget about the humans now inside them. The living forms inside these other forms may already have transcended the question of gender, having grown weary of the impediment of the dual relationships imposed on us for centuries. The *Bodyshells* are merely empty vessels – or may, depending on the circumstances, be host to jinns.

It was not uncommon in previous centuries to imagine humans mutating into other shapes – walking sculptures, for example, soft forms that add organicity to the classical language of object and form making. Influenced by fashion, popular culture, dance and television, the *Bodyshells* are equally naïf and vulnerable in their nature. But besides these obvious traits, the artist was mesmerised by the unsettling expressiveness of shellfish. It may have been no more than a thought or a phrase, such as “looking for a new direction”, that propelled her towards exoskeletons and houses – simple forms that appear to offer a flippant way to describe to all of us an existential, a no less gut-wrenching one in its universality.

III. The Venus clam in her studio shell

There is a body of work that is specially interesting with regard to Heidi Bucher’s relationship with the making of art and its history: her series of studio portraits of nude men (fig. p. ##). Shells are the calcified remains of some long-dead animal. The body in the studio is also a relic of a practice within art history. Like a fossil, it tells the story of a time and a relationship with academia and the female body and the secondary position of women artists inside a discipline.

French painting in the mid-nineteenth century underwent a critical transformation, evolving from the academic, neoclassical style into a more progressive language. The idealised, nude goddesses of the neoclassical tradition were gradually replaced by varieties in which avant-garde painters chose the representation of the female nude as a front for their challenge to the accepted standards of the academy. Female nudity was permissible only within the context of a recognisable narrative in an imaginary, mythological or biblical landscape. However, artists soon portrayed women in a more naturalistic form and engaged in everyday activities, undermining established clichés of femininity and trying to avoid the voyeurism associated with traditional nudes of the period.

Heidi Bucher depicted her private sphere in her notebooks: large series of male nudes, the occasional nude self-portrait, as well as sketched drawings of dressed men. In these images of naked figures, she dispenses with any explicit erotic features. The nudes seem to be the result of an observation of the male body based on simple instructions to display the body in several positions in order to best capture its movements and expressions (figs. 7, 8 and 9). Looking at these drawings, it is easy to imagine the conversations and interactions taking place between the artist and her models. Their male anatomies are not an object of erotic desire but a research into artistic concerns of technique and composition. But in their performing a classic exercise in the study of the body, the drawings reveal an interest in the political nature of their subject matter. They give a slight impression of being a distraction, of an artist indulging in a genre that is out of fashion, that does not necessarily belong to the exhibition, made not for the public but for herself. There is pleasure involved for an artist

who portrays men but chooses not to include the human figure in her sculptural installations. And yet all her work revolves around the question of the place, the inhabited spaces – shells or houses – which resemble the skin of a dead whale stranded on the shore. Where once there was life, there is no longer any life.

In her sketchbooks, however, these people are not in the past. The men represent a continuous present of relations. When we look at the naked bodies, they seem to pose the question: Is the male body the “place” of the widely accepted values of patriarchy? It seems worth staying engaged with this question as we study the men, their faces, their naked traits. Can a woman artist, through all those encounters, investigations, conversations, discover why women – in most societies – still have fewer rights or a lower social status than men?

It is, of course, a question we can only infer, but it is interesting to note the different elements in the work of an artist who is obviously preoccupied by her place and that of her work in art. These drawings seem to wish to maintain a balancing act between, on the one hand, her installations and, on the other, the less private series of drawings and works deriving from her private life. The presence of her own body, a realistically portrayed female nude, takes on a special dimension because it helps to convey the social norms, the handling of nudity as the place to research the tightrope between artistic and pornographic depictions. Nudity offers an opportunity to reflect on the set of norms surrounding the question of “appropriate” life, a life according to the expectations of others but now observed by the artist herself. In a sense, these drawings are a study of those norms and the way bodies, dress codes, expressions signal to the female artist.

IV. The skin

Heidi Bucher’s “skin” works are remarkable not only in the way they reinvent sculpture, but also in the way they awaken a memory of a process that surpasses any traditional sculptural process (figs. pp. ##–##). Her latex-skin works evoke associations with mortuary masks, which can be interpreted as part of a funerary ritual recalling the artist’s past, but also as an expression of hope that this past will disappear. The translucent quality of this dead material, latex, its ability to translate certain traits and details, its yellowish colour – all this addresses the need to acknowledge certain cultural beliefs: the house and the question of origin; the room as a unity of power, as the centre of a certain type of transmission of values; the bed as the place of birth and death. In this, Heidi Bucher proceeds in the manner of both a community shaman charged with producing these objects of meaning, and an analytic anthropologist entrusted with the role of making us reflect on their role, form and past function. The historical reading of mortuary rituals focus on the social aspect. Through the remains and traces of a particular community, we are able to discover who they were and how they were organised, but also the circumstantial and physical factors that caused their end.

Through these iconic works, Heidi Bucher created a code that not only addresses her personal life – her parent’s home, her feelings towards her origins – and the notion of the individual, hypersensitive female recreating a vulnerable space, but one that is also a formal and aesthetic language aimed at focusing attention on the cultural guidelines that determined the treatment and disposal of the body in those spaces, its power, its function, its sexuality. We do not see the people involved, nor are there any documents describing those societies. We are left to deduce the facts from the remains. These objects are able to

tell us what happened and, at the same time, prescribe a period of mourning for close relatives. Are we close relatives? We are. The skins are an expression of a cultural blueprint, of attitudes, values and ideals passed down by parents and previous generations, which an individual learns as a member of the given society. The artist knows that we will recognise the various elements and understand the importance of a death ritual (fig. 10).

While her interest in shells is an interest in natural sculpture, geological time, care and shelter, her latex-skin works inform us about a society and its beliefs. Rooms and beds are secular symbols and yet they reference the stereotyped spatial and social communication that takes place in homes. These are not spaces of protection, but rooms that prepare the organisms – us humans – to perform in social rituals and to coordinate our preparation for action among several organisms, including humans (fig. 11).

This is perhaps why the dress-shells appeared in her early work. If we look at the evolution of her work chronologically, we may read these early works as her remaining interest in fashion and performance. But if we consider these works independently of any timeline, it is easy to see the vital importance of relativising the weight of all these symbols of human society, of a certain social and educated class, to the world of non-human organisms. Performing the part of the non-human allows for the emergence of sentiments, values and beliefs which transcend the utilitarian codes of Western bourgeois societies. For a woman – a woman artist – behaviour needs to become ritualistic, since there is almost no other possibility besides being a daughter or a mother or a wife. Otherwise, it risks being socially sanctioned. A possible escape is to seek refuge in the realm of the symbolic and to stress the supernatural, the hypersensitive or the ultra-personal. A woman artist's work is too often reduced to the role of expressing and amending social relationships and helping to secure mystical blessing, purification, protection and prosperity.

Heidi Bucher's architectural skins and room skins reference this possibility, offered not as a means of being redeemed but as part of a death ritual. These objects are the past, disappearing societies, with the houses and their inhabitants representing death. In that sense, her work elaborates on the intersection between a world view – her own as an individual of a particular group and society – accompanied by a world-history view, namely the second half of the twentieth century in central Europe. In her work, through her references, materials and formal languages, she relates two propositions that are, in some respects, axiomatic. The first proposition: humans are part of nature, and can be dissociated from it only in an artificial and illusory way. The second proposition: biodiversity is the source of all creation (and progress). The first is indeed more obvious, given the subjects she chooses and through her references, but the second is ever-present, as pearl mother, as sexuality, as gender, as shell, as a gigantic skin sensing the world.

V. All organs meet

In 2018, the scientific community made a huge discovery: a large human organ “hidden” in our skin. Various publications described the new organ – called the “interstitium” – as a “shock absorber” that keeps tissues from tearing. *National Geographic*, for example wrote: “The interstitium is a layer of fluid-filled compartments strung together in a web of collagen and a flexible protein called elastin. Previously, scientists thought the layer was simply dense connective tissue.”² This makes our skin not just a coat or a layer but an extensive organ able to regulate the feeling of pain in our organism. As I briefly mentioned at the beginning of my text, when describing my conversation with the scientist Alexander

Tarakhovsky, artists and poets have long known this to be the case. And over the centuries, we, too, have come to know this through references in written works and works of art to skin as a soft and sensitive organ retelling the world in waves of sensations.

I think that the axis of nature reappears in Heidi Bucher's latex works. While they can indeed be seen as mortuary masks, this reading does not exclude other interpretations, such as seeing them as the natural process of moulting or shedding that certain animals undergo. What if the whole world possessed a skin? One that enabled all forms of life, even institutions such as the home, to be protected, withstand adverse conditions and accept the pain of individual and social transformations. If everything imaginable had a skin rather than a facade, a cover or a roof – simply a skin – this would create infinite mutualities between materials and humans, between animals and rocks, between all the surfaces of the planet. In that sense, those objects are not the negative side of existing spaces, but old exoskeletons and skins that have grown old because we have outgrown them. Every year, the coastal sands in many latitudes of the planet are covered in thousands of perfectly formed, empty crab shells. These body shells are part of a natural process called moulting – a critical and incredible event in the life cycle of many an organism. Humans have a flexible skin and bones that stretch and grow with us over time, while other animals, such as certain species of crab, have rigid outer bodies, like our institutions.

When viewing the works of Heidi Bucher, there comes a moment when it is easy to imagine her being interested in technology, in visual imaging with high-resolution tactile sensing, in being able to retranslate multi-sensorial views on place and space in relation to the multiple dimensions – historical, economical, class, gender – that define a woman artist of her time. One can even imagine her being interested in DNA tests, in finding out the genetic commonalities between the materials she used throughout her life and our own skin.

It is this power – of a work capable of igniting our thinking about the relations of form, the sensorial organs and the conditions imposed by culture – that I call artificial intelligence. Art that is capable of envisioning epistemological transformations. How does such a transformation take place? Not only by imagining new forms that bring with them new questions, but also by relating the existing forms and questions differently. The work of Heidi Bucher expresses the importance of work that inhabits an expanding sensorial space. An expansion that is being performed through the institutionalised language of forms used by certain genres – such as sculpture – but also through presenting an uncommon intersection of art and culture in the public domain. This hyper-sensorialisation of the materials and language practice embodies a change in the way we imagine what is possible, proposing the invention of a new ground to sense not the past of art and the social world but their future. The work of Heidi Bucher has a metamorphic dimension: it aspires to be alive, to cease to be culture and become skin, shell, nature. And nature today names a complete revolution in the way we sense, in the way we relate organic and non-organic life, in the way we understand gender, generative life, power and life.

¹ "Schmeckt denn der Weltraum, in den wir uns lösen, nach uns?", from "The Second Elegy", *Duino Elegies / Duineser Elegien* (bilingual edition), trans. C. F. MacIntyre (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), pp. 14–15.

² Sarah Gibbens, "New Human 'Organ' Was Hiding in Plain Sight", 27 March 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2018/03/interstitium-fluid-cells-organ-found-cancer-spd/> (accessed 17 January 2021).