

Tempered in the crucible of Hitler's Germany, Horn was born in 1944. A year later the megalomaniac was dead and Rebecca was beginning a new life. One of her works, 'Book of Ashes' seems to symbolize her rise from the terrible ordeal of WWII, a re-birth undergone by all Germans of that era. The simplicity of the small stage evokes inestimable German precision while the grit and the dirt and broken shards remind the viewer that the Third Reich superimposed its will on the body of the German people. But then, like a phoenix rising from its own ashes a shaft of light extends forth. Perhaps this shaft is rearranging or simply escaping. At the same time one feels that a violent rush of wind might sweep the slate clean and leave only precise surfaces.

Horn spent much of her childhood running away from her nationality and attempting to put behind her the atrocities perpetuated by her countrymen. "We could not speak German. Germans were hated. We had to learn French and English. We were always traveling somewhere else, speaking something else. But I had a Romanian governess who taught me how to draw. I did not have to draw in German or French or English. I could just draw." With this new found talent came a freedom and ability to communicate without language and to tap into a more fundamental human emotion. Art, like mathematics and engineering has its own language that can be understood by those who are willing to expend the effort.

Instead of economics Rebecca attended the Hamburg Academy of Fine Arts where she began to work with fiberglass and polyester, the fumes of which are toxic. For her love of art she was gifted with lung poisoning and eventually ended up in a sanatorium. "In 1964 I was 20 years old and living in Barcelona, in one of those hotels where you rent rooms by the hour. I was working with glass fiber, without a mask, because nobody said it was dangerous, and I got very sick. For a year I was in a sanatorium. My parents died. I was totally isolated" Isolated and extremely ill, Rebecca lived on antibiotics and sleep. Instead of giving up and blaming art for her predicament she began experimenting with colored pencils, balsa wood and cloth.

When you first view Horn's finger extension film it seems very far away from what is considered mainstream art and perhaps it is. In context, however, it makes perfect sense. Rebecca broke through isolation deliberately with her various body extensions. She transformed a potentially hopeless and despondent situation into a staging area for her brilliant career. Her early works include Unicorn and The Feathered Prison Fan. Each piece extends the senses of the person involved. In the case of The Feathered Prison Fan the fan acts as a protective barrier but a barrier that transforms into an exposure and a revelation of the individual to others. This is reminiscent of Rebecca's isolation due to her nationality and her illness. The Fan protects her but the fact that it is made from feathers instead of metal alludes to her willingness to open herself to new opportunities. The Unicorn was actually a film where a woman roams the German countryside for 12 hours with a head extension and minimal covering. The exposure of the individual as well as the extension conveys a willingness to interact with the environment. Rebecca is exposing her art to everyone; she is bringing it to her audience.

Later on in her career Horn replaces the soft and vulnerable individual in her pieces with quintessentially German machines. The machines are precise, they are exact but they have a life of their own and an ability to move as if of their own volition. In every instance the machines interact with organic elements directly or indirectly. Yin and Yang is a particularly interesting piece. This work of art is an evolving transition between black and white, right and wrong. As the brushes move over the surface an infinite number of shades of grey are produced. Life is a reflection of the infinite number of grayscale values where the lines between right and wrong are constantly blurred and evolving.

Rebecca Horn masterfully gives life to ordinary objects like knives, pianos, mirrors, books and mechanical butterflies. She draws her audience in and allows them to feel her artwork and through the extension of her artwork she allows her audience to touch her, bringing her out of isolation.