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Michael Hübl writes about the Art of Nadine Rennert

Translation: Donna Stonecipher

A Quiet Dynamic of Ambivalence

A woman's eyes overflow and offer a helping hand of an unusual kind: tiny arms reach out of her eye sockets and stretch beyond the female face, almost as if they wanted to touch the viewer, while the woman's thin lips smile faintly. Nadine Rennert (born 1965) calls this work *Refuge in Ambiguity* (2013); a second bust adds to its double meaning. Like the first, the second bust is made of handmade Korean paper. But, unlike the first, it has carefully molded eyes. And its mouth is wide open—and stuffed full of limbs: two legs are sticking out of it. It looks like someone is being devoured. In fact, the Janus-like arrangement of the two busts suggests that a mini-person has been gobbled up by one, only to be released back into life by the other. Good fairy, bad fairy. But the simile doesn't quite work, for the two hollow forms of the female likenesses, which are facing opposite directions, are calibrated to a certain distance. Between them is empty, open space.

In terms of formal aspects, *Refuge in Ambiguity* is a variation on a motif that Rennert often uses in her work. Elements of ingestion, absorption, incorporation, and of emission, protrusion, and excretion make up a kind of constant in the artist's works. For example, the two *Functional Landscapes* from 2001: large pieces of artificial turf flung into folds out of which curve pocket-like loopholes with soft, pale-flesh-colored openings. *Judith* (2003), made of black leather, is clearly the head of someone who has been beheaded, held by two black leather hands like a vessel in order to empty the blood it contains. A third example is *Portrait of the Artist as a Businessman* (2009), an urban scenario made of trousers, shirts, and other items in the category of "decent clothes": Rennert uses them to string up fragile constructions, so that the patterns on the materials resemble the grids on high-rises, and an impression of urban canyons is created. But the big city leads a double life: underneath the business-dress façades, white, red, pink, and flowered pieces of underwear reach to the floor. An underworld made of slips, camisoles, and T-shirts.

Historical Citations

With *Refuge in Ambiguity*, however, Rennert doesn't just operate on the terrain of her own repertoire; she also touches on art history. The person-devouring half of the work reminds one of the titan Cronus (Saturn, in Latin), as he was painted by Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828) between 1820 and 1823 directly on the plaster of his house, "La Quinta del Sordo." In the bloodthirsty delusion that he can influence his own destiny, Saturn eats one of his own sons.¹ A comparatively happier association from Goya is based on another historical model: in 1788–89, long before his *Pinturas negras*, the Spaniard painted a number of different versions of *La gallina ciega*,² or blind-man's-bluff, a game that was much beloved in the Baroque and Rococo eras. Here, in cheerful, convivial levity, is practiced what René Descartes in his *Discours de la méthode* described as the groping way blind people advance—"[...] so perfect and so exact that one might almost say that they see with their hands."³ But *Refuge in Ambiguity* looks even farther back. One thinks, for example, of representations of the dead as found on sarcophagi in the Late Middle Ages. The experience of the Black Death, which took millions of lives with it in Europe between 1347 and 1353, resulted in a profound change of mentality, and also in the embrace of a certain sepulchral culture. On the lids of stone coffins, instead of idealized figures of rulers, figures were

attached whose corporeal intactness was seriously compromised through processes of decay. All kinds of vermin had eaten through the corpse. The skin resembled a gnawed and shredded loose husk. Snakes, blindworms, and limbless lizards wound through the eye sockets, reaching out into the world of the living, just like the little arms in Rennert's *Refuge in Ambiguity*. This comparison with the disillusioned realism of that era, which rippled out even into the Baroque period, is further supported by the artist's use of the death's-head motif in various works—perhaps most memorably in her sculpture (or sculptural setting) *Erinnerung an Vollendung* (Memory of Perfection, 2011), in which a voluptuous female figure is perched on a tall stool, holding a thick rope in her hands. It lies coiled before her on the floor at a certain distance and extends from there to between her legs, becoming visible again behind her, under her posterior. It's unclear whether the sitting figure is introducing the thick rope into her body or if she is pulling it like a bulky umbilical cord out of it. What is certain is that existence and nonexistence are at play here. The rope is cut off like the Norns' threads of fate in Norse mythology. And: from the back of her head and over her soft, full breasts down to her ankles, the woman's figure is covered with the bleak grimaces of skulls.

At the same time, the line between naked and clothed is porous. On her upper body, the hollow-eyed motif seems, like a chalk-white tattoo, to sit directly on or in her uncovered skin, but beneath that, it suddenly covers pant legs, as if it were a large-scale textile pattern. The feet, however, which stick out of the pant legs and sit firmly on the floor, are not affected by the macabre body surface. Otherwise the empty bone casing is everywhere; the position of its jaw lends it a cynical grin. That's why it serves so well as a vanitas motif—to demonstrate the biological frailty of humans and the transience of their beauty, reputations, and deeds, or to show death in all its crudeness: a “grim obliterater of all countries, destructive spurner of all values, gruesome murderer of all good people,” (“grimmiger tilger aller lande, schedlicher echter aller werlte, freissamer mörder aller guten leute”),⁴ as Johannes von Tepl, author of *The Ploughman of Bohemia*, complains at the start of his disputation, written probably after 1400.

The Essential as Experiment

Despite her affinity for these motifs, neither *Erinnerung an Vollendung* nor any other of Rennert's works were conceived as memento mori, as reminders to keep our own mortality always in view. This message can be teased out here and there, but Rennert's artistic intentions are not limited to an appellative or symbolic gesture. They reach beyond that. A first hint as to one of the objectives Rennert is aiming at are the eye sockets and mouth openings. They are formed like hollows, as if someone had cut them with great precision out of the flesh of the opulent body. During such a procedure, a knife or a scalpel can accidentally hit a bone. For Rennert, especially considered in light of her sculpture *Erinnerung an Vollendung*, bones have become a synonym for “the essential.”

The impetus for this semantic equivalence was a comment. In 2011, Nadine Rennert traveled to the National Art Studio Goyang, in South Korea, on a fellowship; the still-unfinished sculpture stayed behind in her studio. Once back in Berlin, the artist became aware that not only had her horizons been broadened, but her social frame of reference had changed completely. It was under these circumstances that she finished her *Erinnerung an Vollendung*. In 2012 she exhibited the piece in a group show. It turned out to be a momentous step, for a visitor to the show wrote in the guestbook at the Kunsthalle Mainz: “The body is like a piece of paper that is erased in the bedrock of rebirth and rewritten with every new life path. The paper is transitory, but the essential remains.”⁶ Rennert couldn't stop thinking about this remark. It brought her to the question: What, then, is “the essential”—

how can it be defined? She now sought to use intercultural exchange to get closer to a clarification. The artist asked language students to translate the comment from Mainz into their respective mother tongues. At times she encountered misunderstandings, for even in the case of simple content, languages are not 1:1 compatible: generally speaking, one understands the German *platz* as something quite different from an Italian *piazza* or an American *plaza*.

This discrepancy really becomes noticeable with an abstraction like “the essential.” And so the students’ efforts to fulfill Rennert’s request led to some unexpected solutions. The artist was happy with the results of the experiment, and stated: “Two of the translations of the word *essential* have a surprising similarity, and refer to the corporeal aspect of being: in Japanese the word (spoken as) *seizui* includes a sign that means ‘bones’ and a sign that means ‘to have’—to have bones. In Hebrew, the word (spoken as) *ezem* can be changed in the feminine plural form to *azamot*. The meaning of *azamot* is skeleton, bones, human remains.”⁷

Restless Seeker

To keep pushing till she has gotten to the bottom of a problem distinguishes the art practice of Nadine Rennert. After the first questions have been answered, she is already restlessly seeking the next questions, the hidden ones. This is the decisive impulse behind her work. To fulfill this ambition, Rennert has even abandoned the relatively protected daily existence between studio and apartment and exposed herself to temporary homelessness: for the photo series *Bellesouspont* (2005) she decorated her clothes with 80 mini lightbulbs, which roughly marked the contours of her body. She arranged this selectively lit, but otherwise thoroughly black cloth in 13 different positions under three Berlin bridges. It lay there like a dark bundle of abandoned rags. Or—was it a person who had found meager shelter at the edge of the curb, under the drafty roof of a public transportation structure? Only those who walked up to the equally unsettling and fascinating form and bent down to look were able to determine that someone, half concealed or wrapped up, had lain down there and exposed herself to the public—to curious animals as well as ignorant passersby. It was the artist herself.

Not only was *Bellesouspont* realized in an in-between zone, between an inside and an outside, but the project—which as static performance functioned without an audience, or only with a chance one—points to a transition in the oeuvre of Nadine Rennert. In her early years as an artist, her work was strongly based on textiles. Ruffled, puffy, pleated textiles, which at times almost took on the look of haute couture, substituted for the human body, which would only take on obvious form in a later phase of her career. She made objects such as *The Forgotten* (1993), a tall cylindrical form made out of regularly pleated fabric, which rests on a pointy turned wooden base in the style of historicist furniture. Were it not for the title and the work’s size, *The Forgotten* could be understood as an allusion to a Torah scroll. Instead, also because of the way it leans slightly tilted against a wall, *The Forgotten* evokes images of an oldish girl, grown too tall too fast, waiting in vain to be invited to dance. This notion is enhanced by the dull pink of the cloth and the fact that Rennert arranged the work in such a way that, one imagines, it need only be set in motion like a humming top before the rigid oblong roll of fabric opens like the skirt of a woman whirling over a dance floor in agitated spins.

From these beginnings, in the mid-1990s Rennert began to make sculptures whose soft materiality and organ-shaped forms she countered with links to connotations from the military-technological realm: for example, she titled a cuddly, torn-open object made of Styrofoam, polyester batting, cloth, and fake fur *Bomb* (1994); another, made only of polyester batting, was entitled *Bolide* (1996). Following on these works, for a time Rennert made blossomlike pieces that seemed to grow explosively out of the wall; it was said that these flowers, in the work

Untitled, celebrated “their blooming as a lightning-quick feat that displaces space and freezes in the midst of movement.”⁸ The dynamic that here breaks fresh ground would subsequently be fettered, transformed into compressed energy. The untitled objects Rennert made in 2000 are plump clusters of bulging padded singular forms. The surface is fluffy, but because Rennert constricted the forms with strips of imitation leather and rigorously sewed together the edges of the many curves, a vitality tamed only with great effort seems to be pushing outward, the energized objects about to burst. The link to the human, to human existence, even to the human figure, appears indirectly—it is encoded, metaphorical. If the works made of polyester batting like *Ring* (1996), *Helix* (1996) and *Motor* (1997) can be read as analogies of cell clusters that have grown to XXL size through overfeeding or mismanagement of a genetic program, the compact objects from 2000 covered in fake fur are clearly inspired by the formal repertoire of female and male sexual organs. Rennert has tied together the erotically loaded components into intertwining hybrids that melt into each other. In a way, she has made of them androids fixated on desire and the sex drive—prototypes of origin, not unlike Gustave Courbet, who painted the widely spread legs of a naked woman and called this veduta of a vagina *L’origine du monde*.⁹

Narrative Elements

This fragmentary approach, or rather, this focus on isolated aspects or functions of being human continued to occupy Rennert in her next works, but what changed was that the sculptures were tied more and more to a narrative context. At first the artist was interested in mythological narratives, like that of the widowed Israelite from the Old Testament who cuts off the head—hazy from alcohol—of the Assyrian general Holofernes with his own sword (*Judith*). Or the ancient myth of the sea nymphs the Nereids, whose complaint to Poseidon caused him to create a flood and demand that King Cepheus of Ethiopia sacrifice a daughter to him (*Nereid Pants*, 2003). Even with a work that could have been inspired by the myth of Procrustes, Nadine Rennert avoids making an explicit connection to the stock of stories thousands of years old, although certain details point to the Attic bandit who violently shaped his victims so that they would fit into his torturer’s bed. And in fact Rennert’s piece does represent the provisory construction of a bed-frame in which a duvet has been artfully arranged to resemble a human figure, rather like a prisoner who wants to make his guard believe he is asleep on his cot but who has long since been on the run. Rennert titles this work *Escape on the Spot I* (2004), thereby emphasizing through language the images both of being confined and of breaking out into freedom. But the way she stretches her duvet-dummy along the bed-frame with clamps definitely has something in common with the criminal machinations of Procrustes, which were literally coercive measures: whoever fell into his clutches was measured and forced into his martyr’s furniture, cost what it would: those who were too big had their arms and legs trimmed; those who were too small were recklessly stretched and pulled till they were nearly torn to pieces.

Traces of Pain

Three things are particularly noticeable in Rennert’s work, and each is worth being remarked upon. First there is the pointed ambivalence, which is articulated both in a title like *Escape on the Spot* and in her choice of materials ranging between the opposites of hard and amorphous. The second is the latent aggressiveness or brutality, which runs like a theme through Rennert’s work, like a trace of pain. One feels it all the more in the piece described above, in which, at the presumable head of the bed, a length of black mesh synthetic cloth has been thrown over the construction like a widow’s veil. And third, with *Escape on the Spot* an increasing orientation towards the figurative begins to make itself felt. The figure is meant here merely as a loose

paraphrase, but almost simultaneously with this installation begin to appear sculptures that are recognizably based on the human body. There is *Girl in Fur* (2003), whose lower body is substituted by a glass pedestal and whose skin is made partly out of mink, partly out of fine suede; and *Inner Unconcealment* (2004), a floor work that also creates the impression of animal warmth. In it, a body lies with arms outstretched in front of it on a gently rippling blanket, with which it forms an almost symbiotic unity. The body and its cozy base can hardly be distinguished from one another; back, head, and the backs of the figure's arms are covered in the same gray-marbled white foam as the covering it lies on; the covering's edges are lined with the same piebald fake fur that covers certain spots on the anthropomorphic creature's body.

In a certain sense, *Inner Unconcealment* anticipates in an exemplary way what Rennert will do a year later with her own body in *Bellesouspont*: she practically snuggles into the Earth, embedding herself tightly in the material, in an empathically open state of genesis or transformation in which something can grow or change. A state between protection and exposure, between the stage of a pupating cocoon and the full unfolding of a life's potential, between simple possibility and actual materialization. This state has much to do with Rennert's way of working. It corresponds to the hovering-blurred-not-yet-completely-in-the-world state out of which Rennert begins her aesthetic concretizations. It is the plasma that is there at the beginning, whose neutral pulsating initiates the creative process and as to which the artist declares: "A feeling or image comes to mind, perhaps in the time between sleeping and waking. I pull it back into myself, as if I wanted to meditate over it, and try to observe what effect it has on me. When it touches me sufficiently, when it is real, then I begin to draw it."¹⁰ From these first drafts Rennert works out her sculptural formulations, in which she also expressly thematizes the process—see for example *Obscured* (2007), *Escape on the Spot IV* (2007), *The Making of Selbdritt [Three of Them]* (2008) or *Selbdritt [Three of Them]* (2008), all works in which are reflected the processes of movement and time.

None of which means that the artist is interested in illustrating speed in a delayed emulation of the photographer Eadweard Muybridge or in the art-historical wake of the Futurists. Rennert does emphasize that she doesn't see her work as restlessly exhaustive, absolute positing; in fact, she views such a way of making art as primarily male.¹¹ Rennert's efforts are much more focused on preserving, and creating space for, moments of change. But again, not as a simple mechanical occurrence—rather as a sleuthing, as a search for those powers that act behind things. For powers, energies, connections that don't reveal themselves to the naked eye and which perhaps can't even be asked about, because we have no notion of them yet. It is, if you like, a search for what the exhibition visitor in Mainz wrote down in the guest book, that term that confused Rennert: "the essential."¹²

Inverted Inner and Outer

Even if she connects it to "to have bones," this "essential" manifests itself to Rennert not in the belief that some well-defined essence can be scooped out of the surface of the world. It is, it exists, at most, as an approximate value. And: the essential is for Rennert never an abstraction. It consistently retains its animal and its somatic aspects. Rennert accounts as vividly as she does comprehensively for the "specific relationship between people and nature"¹³ which is based on dependencies and exchange. Dependencies that, for example, led the philosopher Regine Kather to the conclusion: "Only because the body is experienced from within does the world reveal itself through its sensual qualities, through its smells, sounds, and colors."¹⁴ The inner world is the outer world and vice versa; to this extent an "inner unconcealment" prevails, and the "beauty under the bridge," la *belle sous pont*

or, as Rennert writes, *Bellesouspont*—does remain unprotected, in dust and street grime, but the tiny lightbulbs she is wrapped in light up like the distant relatives of constellations somewhere in the vastness of the universe. Between the two, between heaven and earth, there is a lot of space, as we know, and it is in the consciousness of this span that the work of Nadine Rennert is constituted. How consistently she uses this split is revealed, for example, in her turning to the visual and haptic allure of her materials with the same careful receptivity with which she has made shamanism an object of interest for the past several years—influenced by experiences and exchanges during her stay in South Korea. With *Refuge in Ambiguity*, Rennert has found a symbol for this aesthetic stance, for in keeping the two half-busts at a distance from each other, she makes clear: Only in an open, free space can the essential be found. That is, when one, like Rennert, accepts that one must continually seek, and be ready—as Rennert is—to expose oneself to the most difficult contradictions, to withstand the most unsettling oppositions.

Notes:

1. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes: *Saturno devorando a un hijo*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, inv. no. P00763. The painting was transferred to canvas in 1873 and donated to the Spanish state in 1881; it has been hanging in the Prado since 1889.
2. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes: *La gallina ciega*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, inv. nos. P00804 and P02781. There were further works centered around this subject: see https://www.museodelprado.es/goya-en-el-prado/buscador/?tx_gbgonline_pi1%5Bquery%5D=la+gallina+ciega&tx_gbgonline_pi1%5Bitype%5D=1, last accessed on April 27, 2014.
3. Descartes' *Optics*, translated by Paul J. Olscamp. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965, p. 67.
4. The German version of the quote comes from *Der Ackermann von Böhmen*, ed. W. Krogmann. German Classics of the Middle Ages. Vol. 1, Wiesbaden, 1954.
5. See <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/de/bpd/glanzlichter/oberdeutsche/henfflin/cpg76.html>, last accessed on May 5, 2014.
6. See <http://www.nadinerennert.de/werkseiten12/werkdaswesentlich.html>, last accessed on May 5, 2014.
7. Ibid.
8. Alexander Braun: "Hybriden, überall Hybriden," in: exh. cat. *Schwerer werden, leichter sein. Nadine Rennert, Daniela von Waberer, Andrea Zaumseil*. Kunsthalle Erfurt, September 10–October 22, 2000, unpaginated.
9. Gustave Courbet: *L'origine du monde*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, inv. no. 1995 10.
10. Cf. Edward Tripp, *Reclams Lexikon der antiken Mythologie*, trans. Rainer Rauthe. Stuttgart, 2012 (eighth edition), pp. 288, 362.
10. Nadine Rennert interviewed by Rory MacLean, <http://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/lp/prj/mtg/men/kun/ren/deindex.htm>, last accessed on May 8, 2014.
11. Ibid.
12. See note 6.
13. Regine Kather: "Der menschliche Leib – Medium der Kommunikation und Partizipation," in: Martin Hänel, Marcus Knaup, eds.: *Leib und Leben. Perspektiven für eine neue Kultur der Körperlichkeit*. Darmstadt, 2013, p. 29.
14. Ibid.