



Figure 1: 1. "Two hands scratching both walls"

Home

Rebecca Horn, Berlin (10 Nov. 1974–28 Jan. 1975) - Exercises in nine parts: Dreaming under water of things afar (40min) This is about L I M I T S. About protocols. How to make a trap an O A S I S. How to fold up inside oneself, like a nucleotide, bonding and curling.

We are scratching at the walls. We are reaching for something we

cannot grasp.

Make your arms the width of the room. We are ships in bottles. We are messages, out to sea. All that plexiglass is more surface for smearing, unrecyclable, to divide all space into infinitesimally smaller spaces, room for even more rooms.

The room becomes a body and the body becomes a room we live inside.

I always say “the” body instead of “my” body, as if the body is a thing I can keep away from myself. But it’s me in this achy thing, and it is my job to keep it away from everyone but myself. It keeps being positive but I am not.

Listen. Slow scratch, endless, intermittent, insistent. Rebecca, how do you expand to fill the space, so willing to trap yourself? You are pterodexterous. You articulate. Body stiffened into a wooden cyborg catwalk, you fully unfold, extend, walk the line.

Each trip your trip gets shorter, fatigue more visible: Twenty steps, then fifteen, then ten, ten again, then eight. Two and a half laps, cross, stop, turn and cross again. I feel your aching shoulder blades in my own, your mirrored arms, your replicating shadows. I wonder if you notice your steps lengthening or your distance across the floor shrinking.

You only let me see your body from outside the portal of the doorframe, which further narrows the film frame encroaching into your own frame. Keep that space between us; the space is a portal into new appendages to fill the distance. Dactyls, scaffolds. More comes into view as you make distance from the frame. Is this an idea unfolding? A Deleuzian theory of the Baroque fold?

At each scratch of your extended digits scraping the walls, I get prickly. Each of my pores tingles. This disturbance of sound makes me taller. Does it originate or resound within my head? I stretch and

wriggle to get it out of and into my body at once, squirming to push it down my spine and out my limbs.

It would require exactly two of my own wingspan — measuring six feet exactly and permanently attached to my trunk — to span my room and reach both walls at once. I have only one wingspan and no extensions. Still, when I reach out I already fill half of this small room. The gaps on either side are absence (of company) but not space (to breathe).

Did I tell you that I am moving to Berlin? To 1974, to this white cube of a room, where I can leave my own white cube of a room and the 2020s, and be no places at once.

You made these exercises at this time of year exactly. They don't seem 47 years old, but then I don't know how long I've been in here.

So, this is also about isolation. We already have too-literal phrases for this feeling: "nails on a chalkboard" or "climbing the walls" or "clawing my eyes out." Your exercises are a mood.

Rebecca, I keep dreaming of your rhomboids (movers' muscled backs I used to trace, my own I try to tenderize) and the concerted effort to lift and manipulate those wings just so. Your increasing ache, the way your elbows crook at right angles, birdlike.

You keep clacking at your cockatoo with your one parrot eye. I get it: the strange, intimate things we get up to when stuck inside and clucking with nonspecific rage. Here I stand at the window like a trapped red light district dancer, but I'm only getting food delivered and I'm clawing at the glass of this unglamorous fish tank and I'm trying to mimic you trying to mimic your bird.

I'm thinking of Nest and Blink, the brand names of cameras people pay to place in the entrances to their homes, and all the security cameras outside my apartment building right now, probably capturing this three-day-old outfit. I would like to call this some kind

of feminist art practice, but I am fatigued from nothing and tired of myself and what has all already been done.

You seem to be becoming-animal in bits and birdseed. Performing parts of birdliness. Parrot, mimic, mirror. Your cluck and clatter and twinkle dark whimsy. Birds and cagedness and cameras and sensors.

Bodies must conform to the space allotted, at a border in a cage, at a boundary of identity, a limit of language or an encoded protocol. They expand to fit, or contort and fold inward. We are stuck. The definition of making work with constraints and restraints, right? Some kind of infectious conceptualism?

Rebecca, your Baroque balsa fingers are giving me the feminine folds of a framework for melted, ineffectual past wings. Your new dactyls match exactly the meters of your room. You hold them with confidence and careful tenderness in equal measure.

Meanwhile I am continually confused by this body, mine, which won't simultaneously and in its entirety fit within my standard-sized bathtub. I have tried. I have argued with and been shamed by an ex-girlfriend about this, as if I never learned the standard operating procedure of a faucet and drain. "Don't you know how to take a bath?" she said. And I remember her voice every time I take one.

Which one of us is normal, me or the tub? Archimedes in the bath, learning to measure density, displacing himself into liquid. Crash-test dummies that only save standard-issue, 1970s-era 5'9" 170-pound men. [But I am 5'9" and 170 pounds and I still do not fit.] There's a longstanding argument in my family about the importance of accuracy versus precision. What would be perfect enough? Right enough? Grammar check tries to correct "shamed" to "scammed."

What is the relationship between isolation and perfection? Am I trying to narrow this down too much? Isolate some kind of theme in solitude? Expand it until it connects to everything? I spend hours on Instagram now, where I saw a meme that said, "Hugh Jackman said,

‘You’re not a perfectionist. When have you ever done anything perfectly? You’re just insecure.’ And it really hit me, you know?” That was the whole meme. And it really did hit me, you know? I was today years old when I realized doing things perfectly was not in fact possible — I guess I thought I had been falling short of perfect as a feasible benchmark this whole time. Don’t worry, I’ve already talked about this in therapy, on Zoom, from my white room. And now I pass this on to you, from one white box to another.

So I guess this is about insecurity, too, and where the mind goes when left alone. And if it’s about limits, of course it’s also about boundaries. About codes. About sensitivities, calibrations, and machines.

Rebecca, why are you stuck inside? It’s winter when you are, and I don’t know which side of Berlin you’re on.

Are you sequestering for political reasons, or meteorological or creative ones? People don’t just come up with the idea to cut their own hair with two pairs of scissors at once, or to paint themselves green and squiggle around behind their houseplants on camera, or to make tiny fish on wires swim inside someone else’s billowing fan-blown chest hair, if they haven’t been stuck inside for a bit.

Who among us has not in the last years stood before a mirror in fear of the haircut they gave themselves in this Übung? The queer confinement urge to DIY that undercut, to bind ourselves to a partner with magnets strapped to both our legs, to gaze into the middle-distance of each other’s facetimes with a hundred other windows open in our browsers.

Each of these nine parts is an exercise in intimacy — through sounds that signal touch, through contraption and contingency, detail and whimsy — we learn the ways the body becomes strange and estranged when it gets all too familiar. How it folds in on itself in the intimacy of isolation.

I am sequestering again, awaiting sequelae — the unseeable



Figure 2: 4. "keeping those legs from fucking-around"



Figure 3: 8. "Cutting Hair" / 9. "O A S I S"

secondary consequences I cannot see but know to expect. I am always impending. Re-emerging. Re-emergent. Re-emergency.

Berlin Exercises in Nine Pieces: Sleeping under Water and Seeing Things That Happen Far Away / Dreaming Under Water Berlin Übungen in neun Stücken: Unter dem Wasser schlafen und Dinge sehen, die sich in weiter Ferne abspielen

(as machine translated / as captioned in English)

1. "two hands scratching both walls" / *Touching the walls with both hands simultaneously*

2. "twinkling" / *Blinking*
3. "feathers dancing on shoulders" / *Feathers dance on the shoulders*
4. "keeping those legs from fucking-around" / *Keeping hold of those unfaithful legs*
5. "two tiny fish remembering a dance" / *Two little fish remember a dance*
6. "rooms encountering each other in the mirror" / *Rooms meet in mirrors*
7. "the jungle sheds her skin" / *Shedding skin between moist tongue leaves*
8. "cutting hair" / *Cutting one's hair with two pairs of scissors simultaneously*
9. "When a woman and her lover lying down - face to face - and she coils(wraps) her legs around the legs of the man - with the window opened wide - that is the O A S I S ." / *When a woman and her lover lie on one side looking at each other; and she twines her legs around the man's legs with the window wide open, it is the oasis.*

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