

The approach

ArtForum
Heidi Bucher
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Heidi Bucher SWISS INSTITUTE

At first, it is almost impossible to understand Heidi Bucher's work as anything other than an utter dematerialization of the buildings that provided the literal framework for her practice. The Swiss artist was best known during her lifetime (1926–1993) for the pieces she described as “skinnings” (*Häutungs*): sheer, milky casts of walls, floors, and ceilings, made from latex and gauze or other fabric. *Untitled* (*Herrenzimmer*), for example, the undated work likely made between 1977 and 1979 that is the focal point of Bucher's current show at the Swiss Institute, is a cast of the study of her parents' house, presented as three panels (the room's fourth wall, originally also part of the piece, has been lost) suspended from the ceiling in a U-shaped configuration and hovering a few inches from the floor. These wispy surfaces confront the viewer with a bewildering lightness. While the house's solid, bourgeois nineteenth-century construction—from the dignified patterning of the wood paneling covering the walls to the elegant decorative moldings running along the edge of the floor—is clearly recognizable, faithfully recorded by her casting process, it acquires a kind of sublime delicacy when rendered in translucent latex. Walking, no matter how gingerly, through the open door incorporated in one of the panels causes the entire sheet, some six by twelve feet, to sway and ripple, as if the artwork is too fragile to exist in the same physical world as a moving body.

That Bucher herself was fascinated by the ethereality of her skins is clearly demonstrated by the films on view in the Swiss Institute's lower-level gallery. Among these, *Räume sind Hüllen, sind Häute* (Rooms Are Surroundings, Are Skins), 1981, emphasizes the moment of separation between building and skin. As the pliant surfaces are peeled off of and carried out of their building-mold, in this case her grandparents' house in Winterthur, the viewer's reflexive assumptions about how architecture is supposed to behave are shattered as recognizably familiar surfaces undergo mind-bending topological inversions: The patterned tile floor of a hallway is pulled out through the front door; a bedroom wall is rolled up and passed through a window. Here, the artist seems first to have turned architecture inside out and then to have left it far behind.

And yet the crux of Bucher's work is just how much of architecture's essential nature she retained. The cast, after all, is a trace, an indexical



sign, which retains a profound physical connection to the object from which it is taken. This direct connection is visible not only in the skins' registration of the identity and texture of the surfaces from which they were modeled, but also in the ways in which they record the three-dimensional nature of their mold: in the scabrous buildup that accumulates wherever the skin encounters a bump or a corner and especially in the simple lattices, made of slender bamboo poles, that Bucher used to give her skins the degree of relief necessary to negotiate inset paneling or the depth of door frames. Though clearly visible, these last are rarely, if ever, mentioned in descriptions of her work, and are excluded from official materials lists, presumably because they embody such a paradoxical mix of surface and solid, ephemeral and structural, flexible and rigid.

These are the paradoxes at the core of Bucher's work, which she underscored by presenting many of her skins not as separate, isolated surfaces but as objects reassembled into their original configurations. Hung from ceilings indoors or supported by simple wooden frameworks outside, these “rooms” remained inhabitable spaces, retaining the function of enclosure offered by the surfaces from which they were modeled while radically transmuting the fundamental properties of those solid planes. And it is this almost irreconcilable duality that ultimately separates Bucher from many of the other artists who have in recent decades turned toward various forms of architectural trace, from rubbings or castings to copies or reconstructions. All too often, such practices take architecture's fundamental properties as given, to be embraced or attacked, subverted or inverted, but never—as in Bucher's best pieces—truly reimagined.

—Julian Rose