

EN

Heidi Bucher

Metamorphoses I

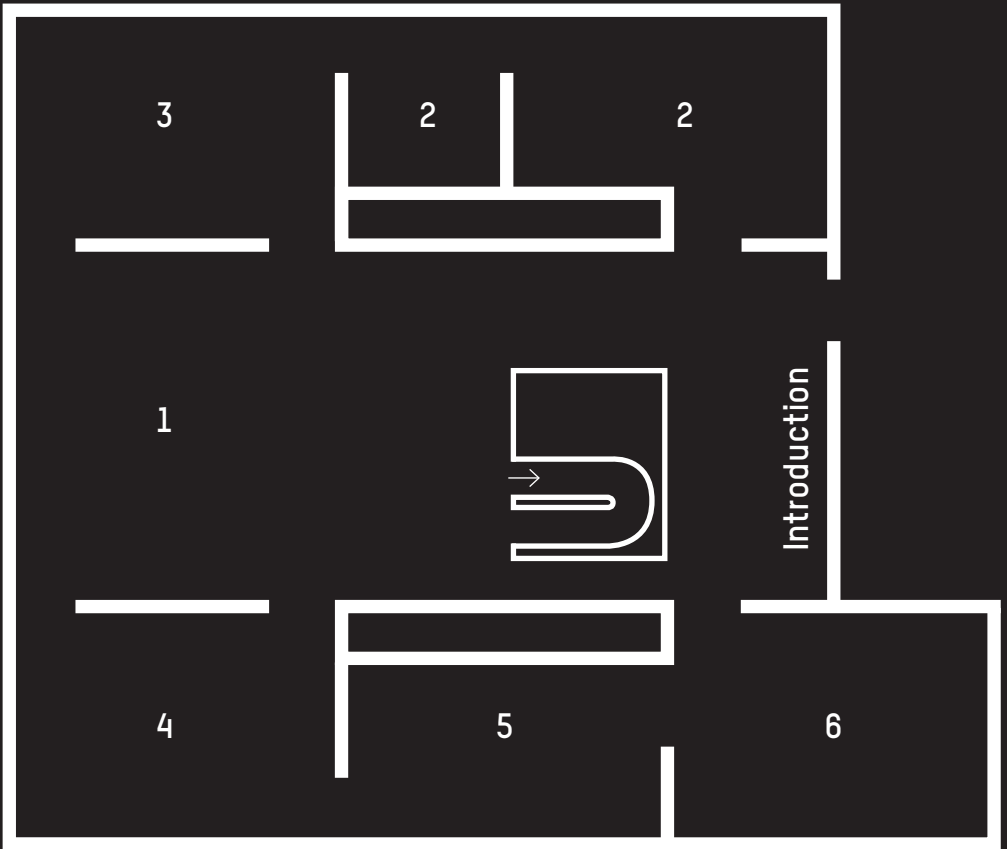
8.4 — 7.8.22

KUNST
MUSEUM
BERN

EXHIBITION GUIDE

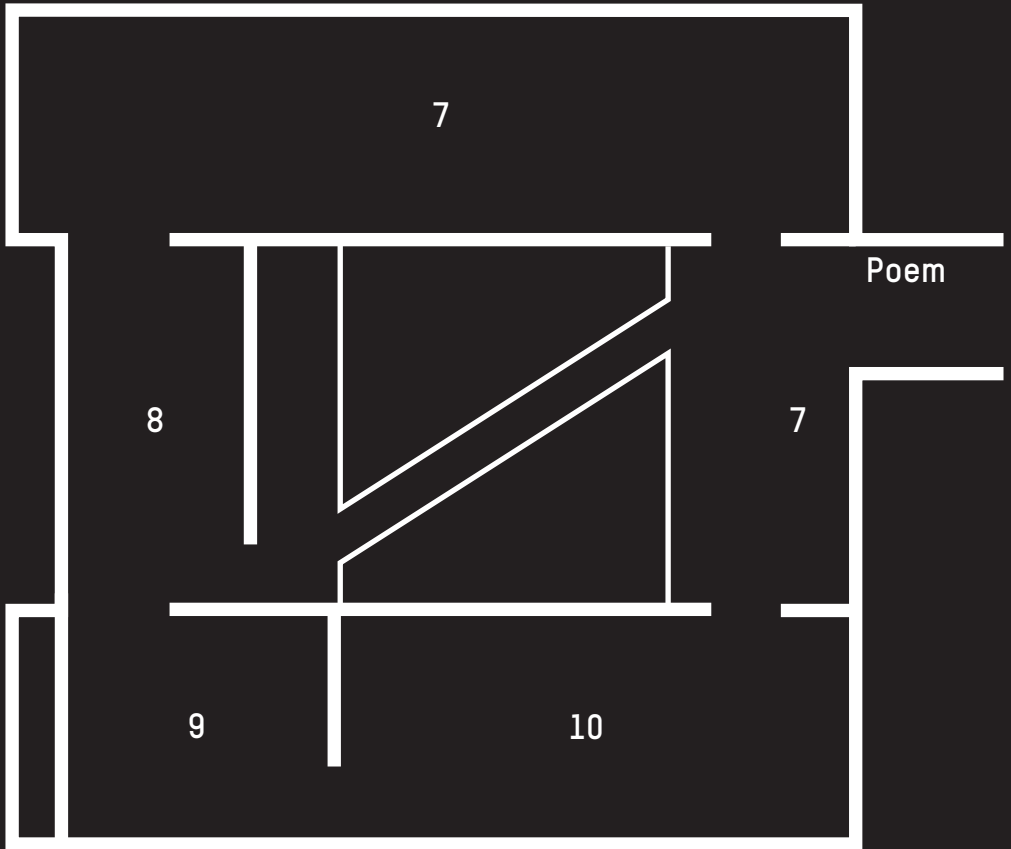
Floorplan

Ground floor



- 1 Gentlemen's Study
- 2 Bodyshells
- 3 Borg
- 4 La Mamma and Anna Mannheimer
- 5 Clothing Studies
- 6 The Hatching of the Parquet Dragonfly

Upper floor



7 Floor Skins / Ancestral Home

8 Dragonflies

9 The Waters

10 Doors / Lanzarote

Introduction

“Rooms are shells, are skins. Peel off one skin after the other, discard it: the repressed, the neglected, the wasted, the lost, the sunken, the flattened, the desolate, the inverted, the diluted, the forgotten, the persecuted, the wounded.” Heidi Bucher, 1981

In Heidi Bucher (*1926 Winterthur, † 1993 Brunnen, Switzerland), Kunstmuseum Bern is presenting a major artist of the international neo-avant-garde who, in her latex works, explores both the constraints and processes of liberation embedded in forms of human existence. Her performative work draws attention to the body in space, inscribing it with experiences, interrelationships, and emotions. The retrospective exhibition “Metamorphoses I” is presenting all the central groups of works publicly for the first time. They range from the early and largely unknown design studies from her student days in Zürich, via the so-called Bodyshell group of sculptures made during a period of experimentation in New York and Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s, and the latex “skinnings” of her major work, to her late work produced on Lanzarote.

Heidi Bucher's oeuvre testifies to artistic discovery and emancipation of the sensual, sensitized body during the 20th century, paving the way for genderless utopias and positioning itself resolutely against rejection, oppression, and discrimination. The retrospective is presenting around 90 exhibits together with previously unknown film and archive material, elucidating the strong performative quality of her practice.

The exhibition is a collaboration with Haus der Kunst, Munich, and Muzeum Susch, where the third part of the retrospective entitled "Metamorphoses II" will be on show from July 16 to December 4, 2022.

1 Gentlemen's Study

The exhibition begins with the hanging work *Herrenzimmer* (Gentlemen's Study, 1978). This skinning of a room was created in the vacated villa of Heidi Bucher's deceased parents. She made a cast from the gentleman's study – a parlor – formerly reserved for the male members of the family, employing a technique developed specifically for the purpose. She attached gauze to the walls with fish glue, coating it with liquid latex. With great physical effort the dried layers were then peeled from the walls and floors. This process-oriented working practice enabled Bucher to take possession of the spaces, which she captured on film and in photographs, as is made evident in sequences of *Häutung Herrenzimmer* (Skinning of Gentlemen's Study, 1978). She not only addresses the patriarchal family structure inscribed in the architecture but also the close interrelations between space, body, and identity. Bucher strives to overcome the repressive allocation of roles passed down through the generations by means of an imaginal detaching of the past. She was likewise able to capture *Parkett des Herrenzimmers* (Parquet Flooring of the Gentlemen's Study, 1979) and the geometry of its, more or less, abstract formal language using the casting process.

In the historical film material showing her "skinning off" the gentleman's study, the artist is staging her notion of rooms and walls as shells that can be shed like skin that has become too tight, while at the same time demonstrating the physical exertion involved in the skinning process as an act of liberation.

Another work on display in the entrance space of the exhibition is *Fenster im Parterre der Obermühle (Ahnenhaus, Obermühle)* (Window on the Ground Floor [Ancestral Home, Obermühle], 1980). It was part of the skinning process undertaken in her grandparents' house in Winterthur, where she skinned several rooms and all the house's floors over a period of two years. The floor skins are on display on the exhibition's upper floor.

2 Bodyshells

Heidi Bucher's *Bodyshells* (1972/2021) are oversized wearable foam body sculptures with a shimmering, mother-of-pearl finish. In the video of the same name they dance, sway, and bend on Los Angeles' Venice Beach, their slow movements evoking sea creatures. The artistic genesis of this group of works derives from the period when Bucher was studying under Johannes Itten in Zürich during the 1940s. The Bauhaus theories he fostered have been reanimated in the *Bodyshells* and their merging of architecture, dance, costume, and sculpture. Unfortunately, the original *Bodyshells* are no longer existant, which is why they have been re-constructed for the present exhibition. Two are on display at Kunstmuseum Bern and two further ones at Muzeum Susch.

It is striking that Bucher's carapace-like costumes, in their genderless appearance, managed to elude the gender discourses of the time. During her two-year sojourn in California during the early 1970s, she came into contact with the feminist movement that had been initiated by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro at the California Institute of Arts, acquainted herself with the work of Eva Hesse, and became friends with the artist couple Ed and Nancy Kienholz. These encounters paved the way to both emancipatory subject matter and such new materials as latex and mother-of-pearl, which became central to her major works.

It was in the two *Bodyshell Nacré* (1975) works that Bucher employed liquid latex for the first time, applying it to fabrics using her fingers. Her experimentation between two and three dimensions, utilizing the materiality of latex and her own physical presence, heralds her future interdisciplinary practice.

3 Borg

After returning from California in 1973, Heidi Bucher established a studio in the premises of a former butcher's shop in Zürich. She transformed its cold-storage facility into the so-called *Borg*, a place of "Ge-borg-enheit" (literally safety or security). Beginning with the casting of the space, the appropriation and transformation of interior spaces became her leitmotif from the mid-1970s onwards. The latex skinning, involving enormous physical exertion, facilitated Bucher's transposition of psychological processes to materials.

The work *Borg* (1978) embodies both a personal refuge and studio in which a new artistic world was developing, while also representing a portal to radical transformation. As with the sloughed skins, a threshold moment is alluded to, a moment of development in which the individual metamorphosizes from one state to the next. It is, at the same time, possible to discern Heidi Bucher's love of architectural details in this early, partial skinning of a room. The keyhole, the door latch, and doorframe are discernable, as is the beautifully curved arch, now held in shape by cords attached to the ceiling. The rubbing in of mother-of-pearl, only hints of which remain perceptible today due to the aging of the material, infused *Borg* with an iridescent pink and elegant ethereality.

4 La Mamma and Anna Mannheimer

From the mid-1970s, Heidi Bucher's affinity for fabrics, rooted in her training as a fashion designer, manifested itself in the "embalmings." Fabric, in direct contact with the body – a so-called second skin – facilitates the inscribing of both personal and collective social values in clothing. In her choice of intimate garments, Bucher embraces a supposedly female world of imagery, questioning constructions of femininity.

She began by laying finds from her family's domestic environment – such as worn dresses, pillows, and quilted blankets – out on the studio floor and immersing them in liquid latex. The shimmering, iridescent mother-of-pearl pigment that she applied to her latex surfaces were to inform the aesthetics and visual language of her oeuvre thereafter. The process resembles a ritual in which the artist addressed fabrics – as physical conveyors of (hi)stories and memories, in close proximity to the body – through direct contact and transformed them into surreally poetic assemblages. She combined the embalmed finds with symbols likewise fabricated from latex, such as the fish, the artist's personal cipher and dream symbol, invoking the interpretation of dreams in psychoanalysis. The shell is additionally a familiar symbol for the female sex. In the work *Anna Mannheimer mit Zielscheibe* (Anna Mannheimer with Target, 1975), for example, Bucher highlights the protective and veiling function of the shell – far removed from any voyeuristic viewing of the naked female body.

Bucher became intensely involved with questions of the gender stereotypes that prevail in patriarchal, bourgeois society. *La Mamma* (1977) depicts a large female figure in the form of four corsets above one another and next to them a dress suggesting a small girl. The work revolves around the subject of motherhood, traditional gender roles, and the limited sphere of the housewife. The female figure being squeezed into as many as four corsets is evidence of Heidi Bucher's critique of the legal, political, and economic dependency of women on men at that time.

5 Clothing Studies

After training as a tailor, Bucher began studying at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) in Zürich, attending the fashion class. She took courses with textile designer Elsi Giauque and the former Bauhaus masters Johannes Itten and Max Bill. All three's teaching had the objective of combining art, design, craft, and everyday life. The colorful clothing designs (1945) and silk collages (1954–1960) on display, are testimony to the above, organically abstract forms that Bucher supplied with movement, they also provide a demonstration of her early interest in the spatial.

In Bucher's sketch and exercise books from the 1940s, fashion sketches, fabric samples, and color exercises executed in the style of Johannes Itten have survived. What remains striking in many examples is the meticulous treatment of folds, gathers, and pleats in the fabric. It would appear as if the seams, pressings, and ruffles of her clothing designs are already hinting at the artist's later interest in such architectural details as parquet patterns, paneling, window sills, decorative friezes, mantelpieces, gables, decorative moldings, and portals. For a tailor and designer, a technical knowledge of folds and drapery is essential, involving an understanding of how fabrics flow around the body and how the two-dimensional qualities of a fabric can be transformed into something three-dimensional.

In Heidi Bucher's work, clothes are presented as aesthetic, anthropological, and psychological objects. She uses clothing as an individual's means of presenting themselves in society, as a conveyor of memories, as witnesses to a certain period of life, and as an extended second skin that can be shed and left behind.

6 The Hatching of the Parquet Dragonfly

In 1983 Bucher participated in the first and only Triennale in Le Landeron with a major action involving the skinning of both architecture and the body. Artists from the fields of dance, film, video, photography, performance, and painting such as Trisha Brown, Maria Lassnig, Ulrike Rosenbach, and Ulrike Ottinger were likewise participating in the triennial entitled *La femme et l'art (Woman and Art)*.

Five female performers, wearing male underwear, took part in a skinning over several days in the former castle prison in Le Landeron. The action culminated with the women rubbing each other with liquid latex, stripping off the resulting castings of the body after the initial drying and applying mother-of-pearl pigment. The result became *Der Schlüpfakt der Parkettlibelle* (The Hatching of the Parquet Dragonfly, 1983). The women's skinnings of rooms in the castle prison were displayed in a procession leading through the town to the town hall. On arriving, they once again symbolically performed the act of hatching by taking off their body suits and leaving the space naked – Heidi Bucher described this as “de-larva-ing.”

The actions once again confront viewers with the metaphorical significance of the body, with Bucher re-evaluating spaces both physically and psychologically. Prison was the first of several social institutions she turned to during the 1980s, places where people are held against their will.

In contrast, *Menhaut* (Men Skin, 1986) is the only extant work by Bucher in which latex was applied directly to the human body during a ritual performance. The resulting cast boasts male body hair still clinging to the fabric. Bucher focuses on the human psyche, attending to existential questions regarding nature, religion and, politics.

7 Floor Skins / Ancestral Home

The source of *Bodenhäute* (Floor Skins, 1980–1982), presented lying and hanging in the exhibition space, was Heidi Bucher's ancestral home, the Obermühle in Winterthur. She visited what had been the center of her grandparents' life in 1980 to begin a two-year skinning action on all the floors of the house. Bucher used mutable latex for her sculptural transformations of places and spaces, the floor skins, similarly to human skin, becoming a repository for memories. The architecture is mapped, and while its stability has been negated, (hi)stories are nevertheless able to materialize. In turning to the architecture of her family's past, she was able to reveal processes of both personal and collective socialization. As the daughter of a bourgeois Swiss family of engineers, Bucher grew under authoritarian structures. A complex hierarchical choreography of rooms is permitted to unfold from her ancestral home and its historical architecture. By exhibiting this skeleton of family history, Bucher was making a gesture that finds correlations in the socio-political struggle for gender equality and the emancipation of women taking place during the period.

The film *Räume sind Hüllen, sind Häute* (Rooms Are Shells, Are Skins, 1981) broadens understanding of Heidi Bucher's interdisciplinary work in terms of process. The 30-minute documentary for Swiss television shows her skinning in her ancestral home and embalming furniture and fabrics, as well as the artist discussing previous skinning actions. The filming of her skinning processes, which she repeatedly initiated herself, makes evident the interplay of body, space, and performativity that decisively forged the concepts underlying her work. In the exhibition, the film recordings, which have now been examined for the first time, enter into a dialogue with Bucher's sculptural body of work.

8 Dragonflies

If her skinnings enabled Heidi Bucher to unmask social and private power structures, in a subsequent step she also opened up space for change. Aspects of metamorphosis are expressed in her manifesto "Parkettlibelle," (Parquet Dragonfly) in which she describes her work as a "process of metamorphosis," whereby a liberation from social conditioning accompanies an introduction of softening and motion to both objects and static surroundings.

The idea of transformation manifests itself in the numerous dragonfly sculptures Heidi Bucher created. Employing the symbolism of the dragonfly, the artist once again not only illustrates her own aspirations – the call to break free and rise above adversity – but also articulates an appeal to all women – that they are perfectly capable of freeing themselves from the patriarchal prison.

The dragonflies exhibited in this space, fabricated from such diverse materials as maize leaves, joiner's glue, newspaper, latex, cotton gauze, wire, and mother-of-pearl pigment, testify to Bucher's ongoing and intense exploration of the symbolic power of the dragonfly, which was to become her favorite insect.

Like the dragonfly, people and buildings are obliged to shed old skins in order to be able to transform and unfold their dazzling beauty.

9 The Waters

Water as a subject can be repeatedly found in Heidi Bucher's watercolors, sculptures, and skinings from the 1980s. The watercolors' broad, sweeping, but also precise brushstrokes evoke associations with wellsprings. A luminous blue is set in motion, imparting a direction of flow in the image. Curved lines or ones from the top downwards traverse the paper like rivers. The shapelessness of water achieves form in the works on paper, creating apparent analogies to latex's liquid qualities. Other watercolors capture coagulation, whereby the kinetic nature of water attains clearly definable forms.

Capturing the fleeting quality of water – which may be a contradiction in itself – becomes most impressively evident in Bucher's sculptural works, such as *Eiswassertasche* (Ice Waterbag, 1986). As in the skinings, Heidi Bucher employs latex and gauze to capture the physically solid or liquid state of water, the hardened latex closely approximating the materiality of ice.

In *Die Wässer* (The Waters, 1986), the constantly changing and transitory qualities of water also find their way into her skinning works. Floor skins, to which blue pigments were applied, cast in the former worsted yarn factory in Schaffhausen, illustrate the alienation of the building from its original function. Bucher merged disparities between hydroelectric powered industry and nature, while simultaneously questioning the construction of concepts of the latter. For Bucher, water is not only an end, but also a beginning. It symbolizes the cycle of life, becoming a palpable element fundamental to our own survival. Related political discussions around ecology, which began in the 1980s and could hardly be more urgent today, can be read as being central to these works.

10 Doors / Lanzarote

From the early 1980s, Heidi Bucher spent increasingly more time on the volcanic Canary Island of Lanzarote. It became an inspiring retreat, where she stayed and worked for longer periods of time until shortly before her death in 1993. Bucher acquired several properties in Tegüise, including the Palacio Ico townhouse. During the time Bucher was living there, the building had not yet been renovated. The artist also used the house, which had neither running water nor electricity, for skinning actions.

The works from her final creative period, spanning 1983 to 1993, once again document her lifelong and intense exploration of architectural structures and the functioning of both interior and exterior spaces. Heidi Bucher thought of houses as being analogous to the human body, architecture being a shell enclosing and cocooning a body like skin. Continuing the analogy, windows become the eyes that view the world, and the door the mouth that completes the house's face.

On Lanzarote, Bucher focused on the subject of doors (1986–1990). The latex fabric castings in Tegüise, their surface texture incorporating splinters of wood and residues of paint that adhered to the latex, tell of a specific place that was very important for Heidi Bucher. Latex discolors and hardens over time, becoming brittle and, like human skin, displaying signs of the aging process, demonstrating that commemorative objects are not spared the passage of time either. The motif of the door likewise represents a transition through different periods of life. The transience that is evoked by the patina of the doors, enables Heidi Bucher's pieces to be read as a metaphor for mortality. The intense involvement with the door is a harbinger of the final metamorphosis, the final transit from life to death.

A Shell like a Wrap
S h e like H e

Unwrapping like skinning
De-veloping like un-veiling
One shell after the other

Shells are skins
Shedding one skin after the other

De-veloping and en-veloping and unwrapping and skinning

The repressed neglected wasted withered forgotten
dilapidated missed disguised hated contorted buried
immersed displaced bewitched deformed misaligned flattened
blown away desolate frozen closed glued hidden
torn apart obstructed dried out transgressed anchored inverted
knotted concealed damned devastated pensive diluted
darkened widened

and

the understood demanded made impossible forbidden forgiven
persecuted promised renounced sensualised secretive
masked stultified wounded misjudged sissified
refused prevented petrified dissipated shifted
obstinate disgusted wrecked ridiculed thwarted
faded elapsed demented enamoured multiplied
exfoliated dreamy untimely enticing refined
thwarted vanished elapsed dislocated persecuted
interrogated despised indemnified missed embodied

and

the isolated ramshackled expelled spared trivialised
squandered seduced attempted desponded raped spoiled
simplified carelessly lost attempted deceased covered
late belittled satirized banished distressed
accursed squandered tortured depleted falsified overslept
decelerated shrouded

and

the built formed loved known ostracised loathsome
violated shared common dispatched spoken designed
taken fallen trodden read overcome wanted
hustled shuttered absconded divided loyal born
struck driven wrapped sheltered pushed travelled
loosened adorned spared beaten respected marked
formed placed known serene grown determined
hated sunken jostled forced tolerated desired
protected collected succeeded guided bored given
separated written

and

the conscious moved subsisted beloved significant known
mothered hard-pressed spoken insulted elderly lied-to
buried noted mourned laughed at anxious practised
decided overcome entered looked after visited comprehended
aspired committed slept accompanied admired marvelled
enlivened palpated enchanted

and

the divined longed-for desired suffered explained awaited
awakened inherited permitted chosen fulfilled dreamed of experienced
educated acquired endured accrued alluded occurred
recognised reciprocated sensed deduced guessed mentioned
conceived illuminated

and

Poem by Heidi Bucher, 1983
(translated from the German original)



Biography

- 1926 Adelheid Hildegard Müller was born into a family of engineers on February 23, 1926 in Winterthur, Switzerland
- 1941–1944 Trained as a women’s tailor under Marguerite Strössler in Winterthur.
- 1944–1947 Studied fashion and textiles under Johannes Itten at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) in Zürich, where she attended courses by Max Bill and Elsie Giauque. Produced fashion textile and color studies.
- 1946–1956 Extended stays abroad in Paris, Hamburg, and the South of France, as well as working as an au-pair in London. Created fabric and silk collages, some of which included her first ornamental use of mother-of-pearl.
- 1956–1958 Extended stay in New York. Worked for and exhibited her silk collages at World House Galleries.
- 1960–1969 Began living in Zürich and married Carl Bucher (1935–2015). Their sons Indigo (*1961) and Mayo (*1963) were born.
- 1970/71 With a grant from Conseil des arts du Canada the family resettled in Montréal and Toronto. In 1971 an exhibition by Carl and Heidi Bucher at Musée d’Art Contemporain, Montréal. The family moved in the same year to the USA, initially staying in New York. In an artistic collaboration she transformed Carl Bucher’s futuristic sculptural designs into wearable body costumes, the *Landings to Wear*.
- 1972/73 Moved to California, initially living in Los Angeles, then Santa Barbara. Bucher became close friends with Ed and Nancy Kienholz. Produced the groups of work *Bodywrappings* and *Bodyshells*, wearable foam body sculptures with a mother-of-pearl PVC finish, which she and her family activated in performances on Venice Beach. A solo exhibition *Body Shells and Shadows* at LACMA followed.

- 1973–1978 Returned to Switzerland and divorced Carl Bucher. Moved into her own studio in Zürich. Embarked on her major work with the embalmings and soft objects, employing found fabrics that had belonged to her family.
- 1978–1982 In 1980 began a two-year process of skinnings in Obermühle her ancestral home, very close to Villa Flora in Winterthur, where her grandparents had lived together with family members from several generations.
- 1983 For the first triennale in Le Landeron, *La femme et l'art*, she produced *Der Schlüpfakt der Parkettlibelle* (The Hatching of the Parquet Dragonfly) in Le Landeron's former prison with the assistance of five other women.
- 1983–1993 Heidi Bucher lived and worked in Winterthur and increasingly Teguisse, Lanzarote. She produced architectonic latex works and soft objects (windows and doors) that made reference to the local architecture on Lanzarote.
- 1987 Heidi Bucher selected the derelict Grand Hôtel Brissago on Lake Maggiore, which had also provided accommodation for migrants during the Second World War, as the location for another skinning action, entitled *Grande Albergo Brissago* (entrance portal).
- 1988 Several skinnings in the abandoned private clinic Sanatorium Bellevue in Kreuzlingen, Thurgau in Switzerland, belonging to the Binswanger family.
- 1993 Heidi Bucher died on December 11 as a result of cancer in Brunnen, Switzerland, at the age of 67. In the year of her death, she was still planning a meeting place, a spiritual and cultural center in Teguisse.
- 1994 Posthumously awarded the City of Winterthur's prize for culture.
- 2004 First survey exhibition, *Heidi Bucher. Mother of Pearl*, at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich.

- 2013 Solo exhibition at Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris.
- 2014 Solo exhibition at Swiss Institute, New York.
- 2018 Solo exhibition at Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, London.
- 2017 Works by Heidi Bucher were exhibited at the 57th Venice Biennale.
- 2021 Solo exhibition, *Heidi Bucher. Metamorphoses*, at Haus der Kunst, Munich.

THE EXHIBITION

Dates of the exhibition	8.4.–7.8.22			
Admission	CHF 18/red. CHF 14 Students: CHF 10 Children up to 16 years: free admission			
Opening times	Tuesdays: 10:00–21:00 Wednesdays to Sundays: 10:00–17:00			
Public holidays	Open on all public holidays 10:00–17:00 Special opening also on Easter Monday, 18.4.22 and Whit Monday, 6.6.22 Closed on National Day, 1.8.22			
Private guided tours / schools	T +41 (0)31 328 09 11 vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch			
Curator	Kathleen Bühler			
Curatorial Assistant	Marlene Wenger			
In collaboration with	An exhibition by Haus der Kunst, Munich, in collaboration with Kunstmuseum Bern and Muzeum Susch.			
With the support of	 Kanton Bern Canton de Berne	 SWISSIOS Kultur Kanton Bern	Stiftung GegenwART Dr. h.c. Hansjörg Wyss	
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