

Aspects of Feminist Actionism

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Before discussing Feminist Actionism, we must look briefly at Actionism. What is Actionism, what are its origins and goals?

Actionism

Actionism is a movement in the visual arts which developed from Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel, Action Painting, and Happenings, with its earliest source in Dada. Actionism has been a major influence on Performance Art and Body Art.

This historical background already suggests some characteristics of Actionism: Dada's criticism of society and art, Art Informel's expression of psychic or even automatic contents, Body Art's focus on the body. In his 1965 essay, "On the Possibilities of a Non-Affirmative Art," Peter Weibel wrote:

Regression to the material as the general principle for the development of the graphic arts during the last decades signals a method of perception that aims through one body to another body and takes place in this world rather than in the realm of the fine arts' false semblances. Centered in the body and in this world, the body is the artistic medium. The human body itself is the work of art, the material.¹

The equation material = body typifies Viennese Actionism, which anticipated Body Art and certain forms of Performance Art. In other

1. Peter Weibel, *Kritik der Kunst/Kunst der Kritik* (Vienna: 1973). All translations from the German are my own.

countries, there are forms of action in which it is not the body but things that serve as material — automobile tires, fat, electronic devices, etc. Using the body in actions corresponds to using these other materials (as, for example, in Beuys's actions). In any case, a specific awareness of material characterizes Actionism, the drama of material acting in and against itself.

The free handling of artistic material also freed material of its old, repressive meanings and made new, prospective meanings available. Freed, extended material extends awareness and frees people from old and restrictive meanings and conditions.²

Regardless of whether the material consisted of the body or objects, in reality the drama of material was a drama of meaning. Material was the stage for various meanings, not only processing and integrating people's experiences, but also activating their ability to experience and sharpening their awareness of the meanings the material called forth.

A way of thinking that sets material free and keeps it free and a use of artistic material that sets thoughts free and keeps them free aims at creativity as the significant form of experience and thus of life. The activity freed by the creation of new sign combinations in the artistic process is not only a self-affirmation but, what is more, a new self-creation.³

Given the way some of the key terms — “body,” “development of the meaning of the material,” “self-affirmation” — relate to the following passage, it is easy to understand why Feminist Actionism has become so important for feminism.

But it is not only through the sentiment of personal dignity that the free direction and disposal of their own faculties is a source of individual happiness, and to be fettered and restricted in it, a source of unhappiness, to human beings, and not least to women. There is nothing, after disease, indigence, and guilt, so fatal to the pleasurable enjoyment of life as the want of a worthy outlet for the active faculties.⁴

2. Weibel, “Material Thinking as Freeing People's Products From Their Thing-Characteristics.” *Kritik der Kunst*.

3. Weibel, “Material Thinking.”

4. John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Virago, 1983).

Feminist Actionism

Just as “material thinking shall free human products from their thing-character,” one might suggest, Feminist Actionism shall free men’s products, that is, women, from their thing-character. Just as action aims at achieving the unity of actor and material, perception and action, subject and object, Feminist Actionism seeks to transform the object of male natural history, the material “woman,” subjugated and enslaved by the male creator, into an independent actor and creator, subject of her own history. For without the ability to express oneself and without a field of action, there can be no human dignity.

Human history is without dignity because it is solely male, a story of masculine activity. As long as women have not escaped and been liberated from male history, the history of humanity has not fulfilled its claim of humanity. “The million tears which have flowed over canvases of pain, fear and despair are the Niagara Falls of women’s servitude.”⁵

Feminist Actionism shares the artistic sources of Actionism, but has other, new ones as well. Just as Abstract Expressionism has some roots in the psychic automatism of surrealist artists like Yves Tanguy, André Masson, Arshile Gorky, and others, Feminist Actionism can be traced back to Tachism and Surrealism, which, in its techniques of automatism, articulates the repressed and unconscious. Women artists of the surrealist movement will therefore be given special consideration. Those familiar with their works can find the insignia of a mutilated enigma in their automatic messages: under iridescent waters, bleeding fish dream of birds. It is part of the pathology of female repression that female desire is still often expressed by the inhibition of travesty — this is true even for Feminist Actionism, hence the surrealist traces. A further source of Feminist Actionism is Action Art itself (Happenings, Fluxus, music and dance performance, etc.), but its primary source is the history of female experience.

A specific style of representation is connected to a specific content, women’s experience. Women’s history is made visible to give women their future. For if, as Brecht said, “the repression of women makes itself invisible by assuming enormous proportions,” it is necessary to show this repression. “The blood trail inscribed in us all with invisible

5. Valie Export, “Those Who Are Not Painted Are Stupid,” *Kronen-Zeitung* 16 June 1973.

ink as sex-specific taboo”⁶ is the material of Feminist Actionism. And there is no lack of material; it is abundant.

*Blood Traces*⁷

There is no need to evoke a psychology of the sexes when role behavior and forms of life created by socialization and education provide more suitable testimony. The battle of the sexes has always already been won by men. The fondness playwrights have for this theme characterizes the exploitation as exploitation of a corpse, for women have already lost entirely different, more important struggles before even beginning their fight with men. The defeat in house and home is only the last in a series of battles lost, from the right of inheritance to the right to a name. World conquest, the acquisition of continents by force of weapons and force of intellect — those were the decisive battles, the domain of men. Women’s marital struggles, which so delight male playwrights, are only a very poor substitute for men’s maritime battles. Clytemnestra shows that women, lacking any real political power, have their only power in bed, the weak power of refusal. In conjugal battles, in battles between brothers and sisters, women are toy soldiers. Their uniforms are made of the despair and bitterness which result from the fact that they are acting the drama of deprivation in the dressing rooms of the great men of state rather than on the stage of world affairs. Women were deprived of more than their human rights in matrimony. She, who had no right to her name, how could she have had a right to herself and her abilities? The Austrian poet Friederike Mayröcker’s “Text with Continents” substitutes “grandfather, grandmother,” for continents. Those are the true inscriptions in women’s military cemeteries, the memorials of great defeats.

Let us read the inscriptions on some of these tombstones: Dorothy Wordsworth, the unusually gifted sister of William Wordsworth, sacrificed herself for her brother’s career. Her escape from dependency was a private literary career instead of a public one: her letters. She remained an amateur so that her brother could become a professional. The price: internal conflict, self-destruction, confusion about herself

6. Gertrud Koch, *Frauen und Film* 13 (1977).

7. See Valie Export’s action *Blutwärme* (*Blood Warmth*) (1973): On the beach of the North Sea, Belgium, two parallel grooves (man and woman) dug in the sand to the sea, one filled with blood, the other with gasoline, are to be lighted. In one groove runs blood, in the other fire (warmth of blood, union, life).

which showed in her stammering, among other things.

Jane Carlyle was married to Thomas Carlyle, who said himself that his wife had sacrificed her talents in order to help make his career.

Caitlin, wife of Dylan Thomas and also a writer, published a book after his death significantly titled *Leftover Life to Kill*.

Louise Bryant, poet and revolutionary, wife of historian John Reed (*Ten Days That Shook the World*) died forgotten, having escaped into alcohol.

The tragedy of Zelda Fitzgerald, who wanted to publish “a work of her own” at any price and died in a fire in a mental hospital.

And what price did Virginia Woolf pay for “a room of her own?” Did she find the space she needed in the waves in which she drowned herself?⁸

Sylvia Plath: her poems — “death, rage, blood, cuts, deformation, pain, suicide, torture, mutilation” — her words. Was her suicide self-punishment?

These women poets’ words — cuts, deformation, blood — can also be found in Feminist Actionism, but not as reflections of sado-masochistic needs, of abnormal drives. They are historical scars, traces of ideas inscribed onto the body, stigmata to be exposed by actions with the body. If they are interpreted as pathologies of self-hatred, poor self-esteem, sorrow, subjugation, or even identification with the oppressor, then they are part of the truth of women’s history. And the truth is such that only very few women are ready to scrape away the veneer concealing it. Many prefer the illusion of meaningless glamour to the sovereignty of fully exposed pain and to the *painful energy of resistance*.

But the long history of woman’s constant “double bind” (G. Bateson), which is both within herself and with men, has caused deep injuries, disorders, estrangement to the point of alienation in the feminine psyche. Women have long preserved and sealed off their damaged identity under the emblem of pain’s deformations. To prevent submission from becoming women’s eternal destiny, the wounds of actual historical submission to men must be unhesitatingly revealed. This avowal, this *confession publique*, will free women from the ills men have inflicted on them. Only knowledge prevents contagion. Doesn’t

8. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin Books, 1945). *The Waves* is the title of a novel by Virginia Woolf.

the best indictment, the true victory, come from withstanding one's own merciless self-accusations?

Surrealist Traces

Feminist Actionism is an objective artistic movement, a movement in the morphogenesis of art. It is exactly what male colleagues refuse to admit. The male adversaries of Feminist Actionism, whether critics, artists, or museum directors, ignore the fact that Feminist Actionism is not just a remake of 1960s Actionism, or just an independent extension of it. By virtue of its inclusion of new sources (Surrealism and kinetics) and its use of new media (video and film), Feminist Actionism is an objective historical force in its own right within a broader artistic context.

Part of its historical force derives from the revival and deployment of certain aspects of Surrealism and Art Informel. The works of some women surrealists will therefore be more closely examined, as these are, so to speak, "first papers," immigration papers, preliminary identification cards.

The surreal material fetishism of Meret Oppenheim was especially effective: her fur-covered breakfast china of 1936, her demon with animal head of 1961, her dress and furniture designs (e.g., the table with bird legs, 1939). The illusions and reversals of her masks and objects (which anticipate aspects of Pop Art) sensitize the feminine imagination and show feminine creativity and sensitivity. The fetishlike character of many of her objects points to repressed sexuality and tells of the contradiction between inhibition and desire, between development and limitation, a contradiction which only by disguising itself escapes the taboos of our civilization. The meaning suggested by material fetishism later becomes the associative link in the material drama of action.⁹

Meret's concern with fauna symbolism, which feminist actionists Carolee Schneemann, Lygia Clark, Rebecca Horn, Valie Export, Nancy Wilson Kitchel, and others carry on,¹⁰ is also found in Dorothea

9. Also see Sarah Schumann, "Fragen und Assoziationen zu den Arbeiten von Meret Oppenheim," *Künstlerinnen international 1877-1977* (Berlin: Schloß Charlottenburg, 1977).

10. Fauna symbolism: Meret Oppenheim, *Déjeuner en fourrure* (1936); Isabelle Waldheim, *Le dernier rôdeur* (1945); Lygia Clark made aluminum sculptures between 1959 and 1964, which she called "animals," for example *Caterpillar* (1964), green rubber mounted on a tree like a caterpillar; Nancy Kitchel, *Men & Dogs* (1976) in Galerie Magers, Bonn.

Tanning's surrealist works and in Isabelle Waldberg's airy sculptures made from willow branches or metal rods. Waldberg's work especially anticipated Art Informel's dynamics of movement, for example in *Le dernier rôdeur* of 1945, or *The Swallow Built Herself a Cage with Her Wings*.

The works of Dora Maar, Marie Laure, the poet and painter Eileen Agar, Sophie Täuber-Arp, the poet Valentine Penrose, Grace Pailthorpe (automatic drawings), the poet Mirna Loy, the poets and painters Kay Sage, Leonora Carrington, Maria Cerminova, Valentine Hugo, Varo Remedios, and others¹¹ are especially revealing of women's self-definition. Three surrealist heroines deserve special attention: Nadja, the protagonist of Breton's novel; Bataille's companion, Laure (*Les écrits de Laure*¹²); "Aimée," subject and case (of self-punishment) of Lacan's thesis, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*.¹³ Kay Sage's picture *Tomorrow Is Never* (1955) shows a landscape of rigid scaffolds veiling a female figure under amorphous scarves and dresses. This escapism of the feminine self is also expressed in one of Dorothea Tanning's pictures, *Happy Birthday* (1942), in which she stands before a flight of open doors, roots of trees dangling from her body. Mimi Parent's picture *The Age of Reason* (1961), subtitled *An Imaginary Self-Portrait*, shows the outlines of a black figure. Only her extremities (hands and feet) are white, her raised hands struck by lightning — a woman electrocuted by the unremitting contradiction of the double bind. A bird with folded human hands on a fence of glass fragments marks *The Dangerous Hour* for Maria Cerminova Toyen (1942). But this bird has huge wings and an eagle's beak. It is not C.G. Jung's feminine bird of Anima. The dog breaking out of the wall of Chateau Lacoste (title of her 1946 picture) is a fox with sharp fangs holding a bird in its paws. The Animus-Anima relation is interpreted aggressively. Fauna, nature, rooms, the sea, ordinary things become the motifs of a disturbed balance in the works of women surrealists. They announce the end of the *Galas of Silk* (a 1962 picture by Toyen showing

11. Collections of poems by Kay Sage: *Demain Monsieur Silber* (Paris: 1957); *The More I Wonder* (New York: 1957); *Piove in giardino*.

Collections of poems by Valentine Penrose: *Herbe à la lune* (Paris: 1935); *Le nouveau Candide* (Paris: 1976).

Books by Leonora Carrington: *En bas* (1945; Paris: 1973); *La maison de la peur* (Paris: 1938); *La dame ovale* (Paris: 1939); *Le cornet acoustique* (Paris: 1947); *La porte de Pierre* (Paris: 1976).

12. (Paris: 1976)

13. (1932; Paris: Seuil, 1975)

empty silk dresses) to the women and men of our century. The preeminence given to the unconscious, understood as the historical as well as the individual locus of oppression and repression, has helped thematize the historical oppression of women.¹⁴ In serving revolution, Surrealism also served feminism, which male surrealists did not realize at all, and even female surrealists did not fully comprehend. The revolt of the unconscious included the insurrection of women against their own lack of consciousness and revealed the repression of women: significantly, a 1930 publication by the androgynous Salvador Dalí was titled “La femme visible.”¹⁵ Feminist Actionism has further developed many surrealist techniques and motifs, such as automatism, fetishes, mannequins, eye symbolism, dreams, chance, transformed objects, provocations, blasphemy, sexuality, etc.

Art Informel

The appearance of feminist content in Art Informel follows logically from the emergence of Informel from automatic Surrealism in the works of André Masson, Georges Malkine, Arshile Gorky, Wols and others. Feminist content can be conveyed in even the most abstract Expressionism. Here, Niki de Saint Phalle and the Austrian Maria Lassnig, pioneers of Art Informel and Action Painting, will be examined

14. “Up to now art was decided and administered by men and it is, therefore, male art. Women were said to have no creativity of their own.” Valie Export, interview, *Kultur speziell*, ORF, 30 Dec. 1972.

15. This may be compared with *The In/visible Woman* by Penny Slinger (London: 1971), in which surrealist methods are actualized for the feminist movement in collages, fetish objects, etc. As above: the dominance of the unconscious in Surrealism anticipated much of the present feminist art movement, because for the first time women became aware of creativity, and because the techniques of Surrealism are well suited to women’s introspection. Therefore, there are objective historical reasons beyond the sphere of subjective influence for the evident correspondence between surrealist and feminist art. Just to mention a few examples: compare Man Ray’s *Vénus restaurée* (1936), with Friederike Pezold’s bound breasts in *Brustwerk (Breast Work)* (1973).

At the international surrealist exhibition in London, Sheila Legge used one of Dalí’s ideas, and walked around as *Woman with Flower Head*, her face hidden in a bunch of roses. She stood in Trafalgar Square, as pictured in the *Bulletin internationale du Surréalisme* (Sept. 1936) with pigeons on her outstretched arms. Compare this with the videotape (1973) of Ulrike Rosenbach’s *Kohleinwicklung (Cabbage-Wrapped Head)*. The difference is that Dalí presents the woman as a revered object, while Rosenbach presents her as an exploited one.

The Surrealists both radicalized the image of woman and also darkened it by making it mythological. See, for example, André Masson’s *Doll* of 1938: a mannequin’s head in an aviary, a flower in her mouth (woman = bird).

more closely. Maria Lassnig's abstract-expressionist drawings are self-expressions, as their titles indicate: *Selbstporträt als Zitrone* (*Self-Portrait as Lemon*) (1949), *Wörtherseeselbstporträt* (*Wörthersee Self-Portrait*) (1949), *Informelles Knödelselbstporträt* (*Informal Self-Portrait as Dumpling*) (1950-51), *Primitive Selbstdarstellung* (*Primitive Self-Representation*) (1956-58), *Tachistisches Selbstporträt* (*Tachistic Self-Portrait*) (1961), etc. The titles in her later naturalistic period are: *Thiwahn-Selbstporträt* (*Thiwahn Self-Portrait*) (1970), *Lady im Stuhl* (*Lady in a Chair*) (1970).

However, this series of self-portraits, which has lasted through decades and styles, is not an expression of "narcissism and self-love" as Lassnig puts it,¹⁶ but rather of the "loneliness of the critic." This loneliness of women, their withdrawnness, is viewed critically. "Women are especially prone to withdraw into themselves, and still are. Thus it became their strength."¹⁷ For Lassnig, Art Informel's problem of boundaries, of surpassing the canvas's edge, is always a psychic challenge "to walk the borders of the extended self."¹⁸ Lassnig's graphic fusion of self and surroundings (lemon, lake, couch), with its reification and objectification, its incorporation of the outside, actually expresses an extreme and constantly self-challenging body awareness. Her 1950 *Exkremente des Kolibri* (*Excrements of a Hummingbird*) — the title of which recalls surrealist pictorial symbolism — soon become her own. Lassnig's Art Informel paintings and drawings and even her later, more realistic drawings, share Feminist Actionism's fundamental concern with the identity of the body:

The introspective experiences of 1949 were already "body-awareness" drawings. I have not since abandoned introspection, whether the period was Art Informel, abstract or partly realistic. When I tired of representing nature analytically, I searched for a reality I could possess more fully than the outside world, and so encountered my physical shell as the most real reality. I had only to become aware of it in order to project its image with its center of gravity onto the canvas. One can become aware of one's body through pressure, tension or overtaxation of one of its parts in a certain position. This awareness may manifest itself in sensations of pressure or tension, of fullness or emptiness, etc.¹⁹

16. Maria Lassnig, catalogue of the Albertina exhibition, 1977, in Vienna.

17. Lassnig.

18. Lassnig.

19. Lassnig.

Simone Forti, a dancer and Performance Artist who first appeared in the 1970s, has deepened this experience of body awareness and based her art in kinesthesia, body sensation.

Ann Halprin taught me that our medium is our bodies and their movement possibilities. The way we work with our bodies depends on the way we want to work with them. Thus, we have developed certain problems. One technical problem concerned suddenly changing the position of the spine or running quickly and changing the position of the spine in various ways in succession. It is impossible to improvise completely because it is impossible to predict exactly how body form will change given its measurements and the change of torque in space.²⁰

The tension of the female body which Lassnig projected on the canvas's surface is transferred to the legs and dance floor in Simone Forti's work. Here, too, aspects of locating the center of gravity play an important role.²¹

It is remarkable how similarly women of various cultures and times describe becoming aware of their bodies: Lassnig's *Introspektive Erlebnisse (Introspective Experiences)* (1949), Carolee Schneemann's kinetic theater of the mid-1960s, Simone Forti's kinesthetics of the 1970s.²²

Niki de Saint Phalle's aggressive pseudonym already reveals the cultural morphology she investigates in her highly abstract works of Art Informel. Her first tachistic action was to fire a gun at paint-filled bags suspended in front of a canvas. The bags burst, spraying the canvas with color. The sexual aggressivity of this early voluntaristic identification with male symbols (the gun as phallus, the spurting colors as ejaculation, the chase, the kill, the bags as scalps, etc.) revealed hatred as the actual motivation. In her 1973 film, *Daddy* (script written with Peter Whitehead), she furiously demolishes the phallocratic kingdom and its symbols. She discloses her previous identification as a forced collaboration, a desertion stemming from fear of the adversary's superior

20. Simone Forti, "Kinästhetik," interview by G. Nabakowski, in *heute Kunst* 8 (1974).

21. "Yes, what I've learned from Ann Halprin is mainly the feeling for one's own body perceptions (= kinaesthetics), the visual and audible sensations of the body, the nerves, muscles and the skin. What we learned was to undisturbedly move in the sensations of our movements. It was a deep harmony between torque and center of gravity in the piece 'Sheila in Progress,' Cologne 1974, especially towards the end" (Forti).

22. Copenhagen, 1975.

strength, and reveals the actual source of her work: refusal. Parallel to this refusal, she also resurrects female symbolism. Examples would be the large female sculpture *Hon* (1968) in the Stockholm Moderna Museet (made together with Tinguely), which can be entered through the vagina, and the creation of numerous large and small colorful buxom female figures named "Nana."

Yayoi Kusama's 1964 environment *From the Driving Image Show* was also animated by this shifting identification: banal objects of women's daily life such as chairs, tables, gloves, make-up tables, paravents, and plates are painted white and covered with handsize phallic cloth structures. The artist stands beside a mannequin and brushes her own hair as well as the mannequin's. Marina Abramovic used this hair brushing motif in her action *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artists Must Be Beautiful*, brushing until she drew blood. Not only the title but the action itself shows the shifting identification which was already described in Niki's case, and which also characterizes most of Abramovic's actions: the ambivalence of conformism and refusal, of suffering and revolt. Women's adaptation to the masculine ideal of beauty, even if it is so deeply internalized that women experience it as their own, is already soaked with the blood of self-abandonment and identity loss. Insofar as the title displaces this problem of adaptation onto the male artist's problematic of identity, the action acquires a further social dimension: the artist himself very often adapts to the mechanisms and ideals of society, very often loses his identity, which would consist in a challenge to that society. He repeats in his sphere what woman must do in hers: he adapts. And the artist, himself oppressed, becomes an oppressor. To be sure, the dialectic of adaptation and refusal, as they derive from mutual identification, is in danger of appearing as an affirmation, in spite of its cynical style.

Lygia Clark (born 1920), who from 1959 to 1964 constructed aluminum "animals," made objects which were to produce body awareness in the viewer. The process of the "internalization (*Verinnerlichung*) of the object" began with women surrealists' fetish objects. They selected material in accordance with their own psychic sensations, so that it would evoke analogous sensations in the viewer. In Clark, this has led to an unusual anthropomorphization of objects: her objects become bodies intended to activate people as bodies.

She built *Organische* (*Organic*) and *Sensorielle Masken* (*Sensorial Masks*)

and *Dialog* (*Dialogue*), an object exclusively for eye contact between (male-female) pairs. The sensorial mask, which is worn on the head, reflects the wearer's eyes in small, roundish mirrors. *Dialog* connects endlessly intersecting gazes. The gaze dims as soon as the distance in the constructed object, which the partners wear like glasses, decreases too much. The machine also permits the wearer to find his own gaze in the other's, at the appropriate distance. *Dialog* is not to establish a (technical) order but a human connection, enabling the exchange of equal and unequal. It is interesting that in one presentation, a man operates the mechanism of this *Dialog*/machine, which was built at the high point of the May 1968 events in Paris.²³

Happenings

The search for consciousness separate from a language permeated by male culture, in which female consciousness can only articulate itself in a mutilated way, had already moved Gertrude Stein to create a theatrical form in which the action is not held together and developed by the usual meaning of words. Thus her first play (1913) poses the question: *What Happened: A Five Act Play*.²⁴ It is not by chance that the word "happening" appears here for the first time, since the play uses a new equivalence of elements to find a new syntax, a language which escapes rational, phallogocentric discourse. Stein's other plays also have this instantaneous quality and are imagistic like the happenings of the 1960s.²⁵

Dominance of the body, sensuality, repetition, and illogical events characterize Ann Halprin's pieces. Her total theater includes the spectator in the communication so that "a process takes place that develops out of the moment the interaction with the audience." In *Rites of Women* (1961), kinetic communication becomes a ritualized presentation which hardly distinguishes between life (spontaneity) and art (planning).²⁶

23. Gisliind Nabakowski in "Tod der Fläche," an unpublished manuscript. "The title was taken from Lygia Clark's pamphlet of the 1960s wherein she announced that she had turned away from Constructivism."

24. G. Stein, *What Happened*. "Act three: A cut a cut is not a slice, what is the occasion for representing a cut and a slice. What is the occasion for all that." Also see Valie Export's *Cutting* (1960) and Gina Pane's *Sentimental* (1973).

25. More on Stein by Valie Export in: *Neues Forum* Jan. 1973.

26. More on Ann Halprin in: Valie Export, "Feminismus & Kunst," *Neues Forum* March 1973.

Ann Halprin's work shows that the sources of American Feminist Actionism and Performance Art not only include Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel, and Happenings but that there is a strong connection to dance, ballet, and singing as well. Dancers Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer,²⁷ who had all studied in Ann Halprin's workshops for experimental dance, and performance artists Laurie Anderson, Julia Heyward, Tina Girouard, Jana Haimsohn, among others, demonstrate this.²⁸ However, the younger generation has focused its work solely on their own bodies, experiences, and pasts.

The physicality of dance is well suited to body-centered Actionism. Dance and ballet, art forms traditionally reserved for women, offer a natural starting point for revolt, for the changed role of women. Standardized feminine movements, condemned to gracefulness, which had no other purpose than pleasing male eyes and obeying male ideals of fragility and sexual charm, are decoded and liberated. Bodies produced by years of discipline actually come alive and move according to their own laws. Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, and others create examples of feminist dance actions, of body art which escapes phallocracy.

"Body motorics, automatism, the labyrinthine engravings of Action Painting mark an attempt at counter-training around the mid-1950s. They express a central, individual stance."²⁹ Feminist Actionism arose from this movement as much as from Surrealism. "By the end of the 1940s, Jackson Pollock had already begun to develop further Mallarmé's '*écriture corporelle*,' by transferring his own movements to the canvas."³⁰ The artists of Feminist Actionism have taken *écriture corporelle* beyond the canvas, written it onto their own bodies, and posited their own individuality against the culture around them.³¹

27. See especially Rainer's *Lives of Performers* (1972); *Film About a Woman Who* (1974); *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976). Rainer wrote of the latter film: "its main themes: the undefined relation between public acting and personal fate, the difference between publicly directed conscience and private will. . . . Nothing can secure our remaining honor nor save us from treason and death."

28. More on these people in *Kunstform 24* (1977) and *Dokumenta 6 Katalog* v. 1, Kassel.

29. Nabakowski.

30. Nabakowski.

31. Nabakowski: "Happenings and Actionism envisioned romantic, dreamlike and fantastic pictures of freedom, happiness and autonomy in the early 1960s. They were extravagant longings for the undoing of instincts and for reconciliation with 'everybody.' The co-actors in Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* affectionately mingled with

The abstract expressionist concept that any material can become content if it is transformed by a sufficiently active and gesticulate style of painting is adapted to the body in Carolee Schneemann's work. She links the equivalence of materials which characterizes Action Painting and early happenings to the idea of an equivalence between gesture, text, music, etc. Again, a certain style, a certain intention, and a future-oriented concept of art and female experience become the source of inspiration: the kinetic theater of Carolee Schneemann. In a series of photographs, *Eye Body* (1963), she registers her bodily sensations, how random fragments of her memory and personal elements of her environment are superimposed on her perception. The photographs show her naked body as a body environment collage with furs, lamps, paintings, snakes, water, plastics. Her well-known play, *Meat Joy, Kinetic Eye-Body Theater* (1964), staged in Paris, London, and New York, was a visual and tactile extension of this project. As the title *Meat Joy* suggests with its allusion to "meet joy," the play deals with a conspiracy against the evils of asceticism and develops the feminine dream of a warm, sensual, meaningful, fulfilled life. During the Paris production, it almost came to an untimely end when a man tried to strangle Schneemann during the action. Schneemann's theater of body movement in space is an investigation into and clarification of the feminine sphere involving group experiences. Her texts and theatrical actions are full of sexuality; for her, the obsession with flesh, the carnal celebration of all kinds of material is joyful. By freely admitting self-defined feminine sensuality, other women artists' sexual martyrdom becomes cheerful aggression. But as her 1976 performance *Up to and Including Her Limits* shows, Carolee Schneemann's concerns reach beyond sexual freedom for women. Since 1974, she has taught feminist art history and fought against male culture as a theorist. In her essay "The Pronoun-Tyranny," she points out the extent to which male mania has influenced our culture, so that only the masculine is used in proverbs, phrases, compounds, etc.: mankind, chairman, man of the moment, man on the

everybody, but still they remained in a collective, remained non-personal and without subject. Most actors even agreed on (unintentionally) not attacking the social differences between men and women, their social-conventional conflicts. Carolee Schneemann, the artist who drew attention to the 'missing gender' in the early 1950s, years which were especially hostile to women, was, together with Lygia Clark, the first to integrate matriarchal symbols (spirals, snakes, uteri) into her work — even before the éclat of the artistic feminism in the 1970s — pictures that got lost too soon because they did not become central metaphors."

spot, to be one's own man, a man of letters, cameraman — an endless collection. Woman is the “missing gender,” and not only in the grammar of everyday language.³² Schneemann writes: “As long as we are not able to give language back to ourselves, we will not be able to see up to what extent our integrity has already been deformed.”³³ Her rejection of male language has led to an insistence on physical experience and sensation, paralleling the linguistic perception that “man” is the disconnected suffix of “woman,” and “male” the disconnected suffix of “female.”³⁴ Estrangement from male verbal language becomes mute female body language in the younger generation of feminist actionists: Valie Export, Hermine Freed, Ulrike Rosenbach, Friederike Pezold. In Valie Export's work, fear of the damage male language does to women is extended to an analysis of the damage done to the body language of women, as evidenced in paintings by men.³⁵

Alison Knowles has likewise contributed to a feminization of male culture through her imaginative and innovative fluxus pieces, happenings, collages, and performances since 1962. The work of Eva Hesse (1936-1970), which anticipates much of Arte Povera, is significant, even unique, for the creation of a feminine material language. With the title of her 1966 exhibit, *Abstract Inflationists and Stuffed Expressionists*, she takes a definite stand. The artist, who was born in Germany but lived

32. Zinaide Hippus, the uncrowned queen of literary life in St. Petersburg before World War I, author of “The Eternal Woman,” gave masculine endings to all Russian possessive pronouns. She used the masculine forms to emphasize her status as human being as a woman. See *The Selected Works of Zinaide Hippus*, ed. Temira Pachmuss (University of Illinois Press, 1972).

33. Carolee Schneemann, “The Pronoun-Tyranny,” *The Fox* 3 (1976).

34. Schneemann.

35. In this context, it should be mentioned that the male art scene does not shrink from applauding artists who want to take advantage of body language, this privileged domain of women, her finally conquered autonomous territory. One example of this would be James Collins, whose photographic sequences domesticate women to nice nothings under his view. Eyes roaming over colored beds also degrade woman to a sex object without any will of her own. This modern contorted variation of the bourgeois depiction of the nude that surrenders the woman, under the cover of art, to the voyeurism of the ruling, a tradition thought to be already extinct, is also revived by Arnulf Rainer. In a series of photograph overdrawings of 1977 with the title “Frauensprache” (language of the woman) and the subtitle “Ekstasen” (ecstasies) — what else, the man is in control of his feelings and cool — one can see photographs of naked women in pornographic poses painted over by Rainer in the same chance manner as other poses. A more cynical and despicable exploitation of women and their experience, one that is furthered by market strategy and the intention of being à la mode, can hardly be imagined.

in the United States, created material images (*Materialbilder*) with configurations resembling breasts and nipples. For her sculptures, she preferred limp, flexible material — rope, chain, string, net, hoses, crumpled plastic sheets, hanging accidental forms, organic tree structures. Another exhibit was titled *Eccentric Abstraction* (1966). The concern with nature, which goes back to Sophie Täuber-Arp's work, culminates here in the use of natural materials or materials close to nature. Whether non-natural objects are inserted into nature, as in Clark's work, or whether parts of the body are interpolated into nature in drawing and photography, or whether natural elements are substituted for parts of the body, as in the work of Rebecca Horn, Valie Export, and Barbara and Michael Leisgen, uncultivated nature is always a challenge to feminine self-determination.³⁶

Just as the female body serves men as a "musical" instrument — see, for example, Man Ray's 1924 *Violon d'Ingres* in which Kiki's naked back is painted like a violin — music itself is a masculine domain. Charlotte Moorman (USA) has tried to shake the rigid frame of masculine conventionality with her numerous actions. In performing with her breasts bare or playing a cello of pink ice (Bremen, 1978), she shows that masculine culture is merely gestural. Christina Kubisch (FRG) also protests against music as male eros insofar as her musical performances ridicule it by using undisguised phallic or vaginal symbolism and metaphors. After all, the pleasurable musical instrumentalization of women hides much more insidious instrumentalization.

Woman as Instrument: Feminine Morphology

When, however, we ask why the existence of one-half the species should be merely ancillary to that of the other — why each woman should be a mere appendage to a man, allowed to have no interests of her own, that there may be nothing to compete in her mind with his interests and his pleasure; the only reason which can be given is, that men like it.³⁷

36. Cf. the text of Germaine Richier (1904 - 1959) who got the award for sculpture at the Biennale in Sao Paulo in 1951: "Nature! The animals, the insects. I took cocoons to look for silkworms. I had a whole regiment of grasshoppers." *Künstlerinnen international 1877 - 1977*.

37. Harriet Taylor Mill, "Enfranchisement of Women," in John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, *Enfranchisement of Women & The Subjection of Women* (1851; London: Virago, 1983) 23-24.

In the search for a feminine morphology, that crucial project in the exchange between art and feminism, one does well to keep Harriet Taylor's words in mind. Since women's history is stamped in this way, it is small wonder that the morphogenesis of art showed and still shows traces of that history.

Goethe's sister, Cornelia, serves as an example of what happens when women no longer want to live for men. Passive failure in all feminine roles in order to no longer be a woman necessitates the renunciation of life itself. If a woman no longer wants to live for men and the functions they assign her — sex machine, birth machine, cooking machine — then there is no life for her, or, like George Sand, she lives as a man (masculine clothing, masculine name, masculine habits). The ordering of the feminine role and the demands she did not want to satisfy broke Cornelia Goethe. She rejected her child, refused her feminine sexual role, became frigid and depressed, and stayed in bed until she died. Cornelia Goethe's life was without joy, dignity, and happiness because she refused to be the means for other people's ends. She wanted to live according to her own will, rather than submitting to the will of others, to live for herself, as men do. But this was so drastically denied her that lack of joy and meaning finally deprived her of life itself. Her fate was lifelessness. But the fate of women will not always be submission; being a woman will not mean being lifeless. Male rule will not succeed in destroying all identity.

The first revolt: the mirror motif indicates the search for a new and autonomous feminine identity, free from the so-called "natural" characteristics men have imposed on women as their so-called "inner nature." Changing and refusing roles are some of the cures.

"The Clinic of Two Mirrors"

Self-will and self-assertion form the type of what are designated as manly virtues, while abnegation of self, patience, resignation, and submission to power . . . have been stamped by general consent as pre-eminently the duties and graces required of women.³⁸

The mirror motif is intended to end alienation, the alienation which even Harriet Taylor, who named and explained it, was forced to endure. Her essay, "Enfranchisement of Women," was attributed to her

38. Harriet Taylor Mill 24.

companion, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, and male executors suppressed her collaboration on *The Subjection of Women*.

The mirror, which so few men and so many women carry and consult in a sad routine of control, displays both feminine appearance and feminine tension, women's constant, insecure need for reassurance. Thus in many works of art, the mirror represents more than narcissistic mirroring. It is ambivalent, a symbol of broken dreams and utopias, of broken identity, but also of hope, the retrieval of fragments of a tortured soul, the summons to independence. The return of repressed emotions, the longing for self are expressed in mirror rites. The magical significance of the human body and the magic of mirrors, the pleasure and prohibition of narcissistic mirroring are united in the "mirrored" work of art.

Since this section is named after a poem, the following works may be seen as parts of it.

"The Clinic of Two Mirrors"³⁹ is inhabited.

Alexis Smith's mirroring tears or tear mirrors confront the world with the history of woman. There could be no more authentic articulation in this epoch of a paradigmatic breach between the sexes, in which for the first time women conceive of a consciousness of their own, and so lose many of their traditional, conditioned pleasures (compare also Valie Export's actions *I Am Beaten* [1973] and *Bewegungs-imaginationen* [*Movement Imaginations* 1974-75]). These works articulate the pleasure of resisting, of tolerating and overcoming pain, of overcoming others' resistance, seeing and feeling the loss and smiling about it. For one thing is certain: if women depart from official male history, the independence of their feelings and wishes makes them a departing majority.

In *Mirror Check* (1970), Joan Jonas destroys the *closed* image of feminine objecthood. Standing naked on a stage, she slowly mirrors her body in the spotlights. As the audience watches, she fragments the female body, decomposing it into many tiny images, partializing the fetish "woman" and its symbolic-voyeuristic connotations. The monogamous male glance is diverted, vainly seeking sexualized "areas," sex-bits. Jonas attempts something that exceeds the male's alienated powers of comprehension: she is absorbed in the pleasure of looking

39. Since I found the title of this poem by Peter Weibel (1975) very appropriate for this part of the essay, the author was kind enough to let me use it.

at herself.⁴⁰ Lilli Dujurie rolls around in front of a video monitor. The eye of the monitor supplants men's voyeuristic glances and shows women to themselves. In *Class Pieces, Life Slices* (1977), the Brazilian artist Jole de Freitas smashes seven mirrors with a kitchen knife. The object of her inverted narcissism is the mirror as "daily criterion of women's sexual struggles." (Cf. the mirror in the fairy tale of Snow White.) Visitors to the exhibition *Künstlerinnen international (International Women Artists)* in Frankfurt's Kunstverein, 1977, were to grind the remains of mirrors, the abysmal milestones of superseded history "with their shoes and disperse the dust and fragments by carrying them into the city streets."⁴¹

The Mute Language of the Body

To find one's own words.⁴²

The House of Disease, Forbidden Rooms.

One is not allowed to go into all rooms. . . . From the beginning, I decided on the chamber of the solar plexus and the closet of the hands. I meticulously avoid the hall of the bellies and also the bosom room.⁴³

The revolt against male language has already been identified as one source of Feminist Actionism. The work of women artists like Annette Messager, Gina Pane, Friederike Pezold, Yvonne Rainer, Valie Export, and Carolee Schneemann in developing a women's body language has been discussed. It was not possible to "find one's own words," because words belong to men. Nor was it easy to find one's words in body language, because it too was mainly occupied by male fantasies.

The oppression of women is reflected in male ideals of women. The history of images can therefore be connected with the history of women. Both are a history of oppression.

The Middle Ages scornfully classified the graphic arts among

40. Joan Jonas also made several other mirror pieces. In 1968 she wore a costume of variously sized mirrors. Later on, her performers wore large mirrors indoors and outdoors (e.g., on the beach). She also used video as a mirror machine.

41. Nabakowski.

42. Danielle Sarréra, *Arsenic Flowers* (Munich: 1978) 70.

43. Unica Zürn, *Der Mann im Jasmine* (Frankfurt: 1978) 177.

the low arts, because they were prelinguistic, and because of a religious prohibition of images. Therefore, the oppression of women as especially low beings, who could be reduced to mere physicality, can only be seen in the context of the history of images. Because whenever more freedom was promised — from the lifting of the prohibition on the image to the tempting pictures in advertisements — more freedom became more oppression for women precisely because those images promised more freedom for men. Women's history, more so than men's, is the history of physical oppression. And because part of this physical oppression is accomplished through images, because they participate in the deformation and standardization, the depersonification of the female body as merchandise, the presentation of the female body is immensely important.⁴⁴

Valie Export's drawings and video work examine the historical meaning of certain female poses. By deforming women into objects,

men have succeeded for thousands of years in bringing their idea of eroticism, sex, beauty, their mythology of power, strength and severity to sculptures, paintings, books, films, dramas, drawings, etc., and influencing everybody's consciousness. . . . I try to unmask this humiliating expression by drawing or arranging these female poses anew and inserting them into our present social environment by using materials from the current feminine environment.⁴⁵

The distortions of anatomy, the unnatural dislocations in the darkness of male-imagined transfigurations, as seen for example in classical painting, show the degree of women's deformation. A feminine body language that no longer follows the rules of advertising and classical grace is needed. Everything from female sex characteristics to female body functions can be used as material for free artistic articulation. Thus, a new time and space will be inscribed with women's body language, an age where for the first time, human beings are at home. The echo of the breasts and the belly reverberates not only in the mass media, but also in the valley of hope.

Beginning in 1973, Friederike Pezold has developed a "new, living

44. Gertrud Koch, "Unsichtbar macht sich die Unterdrückung der Frauen. . . ," *Frauen und Film* 13 (October 1977).

45. Valie Export, "Women's Art. Ein Manifest," *Neues Forum* 228 (1973).

sign language of gender based on principles of anatomy, geometry and kinetics.” It consists of a series of photographs and video pieces with titles such as *fußwerk* (foot work), *scham werk* (pubic work), *navel werk* (navel work), *mund werk* (mouth work), *arm werk* (arm work), etc. and is rooted in her *Sinnliche Architektur* (Sensual Architecture) of 1969, in which “the female body is the measure of all things.”

In her photographs and videos, she thinks about her body geometrically, using lines and primary forms. She selects camera angles and body parts that may be applied in this sign language. By cutting and rearranging photographs, body parts such as eyes, nostrils, breasts, and thighs become decorative patterns — a body language which her medium (photo, video) geometrizes. In her videos, which are partially composed of drawn-over film script or picture book pages, she abstracts the sex-specific areas of her body to make partly Informel, partly geometric signs. The sparseness of her movements before the camera induces a meditative state in the viewer.

Rebecca Horn, whose work shows strong surrealist and Informel traits, has also produced pieces which may be discussed in terms of a feminine body language. In these pieces, with their fan and mask extensions of the body, she examines the relationship between the body and civilization: body ornament as law of civilization, the body as object of socialization. She writes about her 1973 action, *Bleistiftmaske* (Pencil Mask):

My head was bandaged with 3 vertical and 6 horizontal ribbons, and a pencil was attached at each intersection. The pencils were 5 centimeters long, forming a three-dimensional profile of my face. I moved my head rhythmically in front of a wall. The pencils registered my movements on the wall with increasingly concentrated lines.⁴⁶

These works, as well as those of Lyn Hershman, Ulrike Rosenbach, and others, connected persona and performance, not merely to adjust images of women or show the attitudes inflicted on them by culture and mass media. Rather, they deconstructed the cultural coding of women, from art history to mass media. For example, in photographs,

46. Rebecca Horn, in *Magna. Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativität*, ed. Valie Export (Vienna: Galerie nächst St. Stefan, 1975).

films, performances, or even life itself, Lyn Hershman played on images of women's roles. Feminist theory and performance in the 1970s used the performer/theorist herself to represent and shatter different socially coded female identities.

Interestingly, a strong post-Informel movement has appeared with the continued development of Actionism in Feminist Actionism. Art Informel and lyric abstraction, which had seemed dead after Pop Art, were reanimated by Feminist Actionism and indeed to such an extent that general interest in abstract expression was renewed and (some) men have also used it in their work.

Echo of the Breasts

Friederike Pezold showed her action *Brustwerk* (*Breast Work*) during the *Styrian Autumn* event of 1973. She distorted her naked breasts by wrapping them in transparent tape and pressing them with her hands, compressing them or pulling them apart. By destroying perception, she both stressed the givenness of the breasts as objects, and approached a self-determined body language representation.

Valie Export's 1968 *Tapp- und Tastkino* (*Touch Cinema*) captures the violence of the patriarchy through acts of self-chosen demonstration. In this "expanded cinema," the code with which she counters the frustration induced by the media is quite evident. In the long run, however, this campaign of women's sexual self-determination, which clearly demonstrates the shift in the relationship between the sexes, occurs at the expense of the woman actionist. Art — any art — needs its breaks. The event was repeated several times and then stopped. In the future, the goal of "getting out of the established trade as an object of exchange" (Luce Irigaray)⁴⁷ should be pursued much more radically.

In Varo Remedios's picture, *L'agent double* (*The Double Agent*) (1936), there is a wall of breasts, an early testament to a "society of the spectacle," in which women's breasts serve as voyeuristic objects of the profitable identity of film screen and breast. In this first true film for women, the breast is withdrawn from such exploitation. It is no longer exposed to view, but only to tactile communication. By having control over their bodies, women attempt to determine their identity independently: the first step from object to subject.⁴⁸

47. Quoted in Nabakowski.

48. Cf. also "Der befreite Busen," *Der Spiegel* 24 July 1978.

Echo of the Belly

Kirsten Justesen and Jytte Rex, the most important Danish feminist actionists, have performed many actions. For example, they ran naked through a public bank. They have used motifs of pregnancy in posters and films, and Justesen sculpted her pregnant body. Justesen and Rex's 1972 film, *The Sleeping Beauty*, glorifies the beauty of the pregnant body.

Export's action *Homometer* (1973) continues her investigation of the mythology of civilizational processes. Her area is the interpretability of symbols, the fact that different meanings are projected onto the same emblems and signs.⁴⁹ In *Homometer II*, passers-by cut a slice from a loaf of bread (symbol for motherhood, as grain is for life) placed in such a way as to make Export look pregnant.

In her book *En Bas* (1945), Leonora Carrington describes a breakdown: she experienced her belly as a mirror of the earth, and wanted her vomiting and stomach convulsions to spew out the evil of the world.⁵⁰

Androgyny as Alternative?

Barbara Bloom deconditioned habits of viewing with a minimal shift: she directed the gaze to unclear pictures on deceptively clear surfaces. Subtle estrangement sensitized consciousness for a break in the female image which initiated a landslide. In early 1975, she placed posters in the streets of Amsterdam that showed a (vaguely perceptible) woman behind glass (as if cleaning windows). On April 4, 1975, in the de Appel gallery, the well-dressed visitors waited in darkness for a long time, when suddenly they saw the following scene, briefly illuminated: a woman on a ladder behind glass. The scene on the poster was repeated live in the gallery. A picture on a poster, which was difficult to interpret since posters usually show very different images of women, acquired its full meaning in the gallery through the negation of an expectation (the usual image of the woman in art). The actual snapshot as the conclusion of a long-lasting poster performance, the blurred boundaries between reproduction and reality: silent pinpricks of attention in the "big sleep," the big sleep of public awareness. Minimal, sensitive gestures to the nature of culturally conditioned seeing, to a cultural commonplace: the role of women in the media, the image of

49. Valie Export, *Zur Mythologie der zivilisatorischen Prozesse* (Vienna: 1971).

50. Leonora Carrington, *En Bas* (Paris: 1945).

women in visual media communication. Such ironic treatment of feminine ideals is an essential part of the activities of contemporary feminist actionists.⁵¹

In their photographs, Katharina Sieverding and others approach the mythology of androgyny — since Virginia Woolf, the search for the androgynous spirit has been regarded as an escape from the history of female self-alienation. Through the possibilities of make-up, the alienated presentation of sex-specific appearances, the transfer of sex-specific characteristics using make-up and photographic retouching, estranged gestures and mimicry, Katharina and others break through the limits of the physical definition of gender.

Our culture, however, is still far from the androgynous spirit that listens to the echo of the belly, for men too would have to revise their ideals: “As soon as the wife of a Jambim man feels she is pregnant, her husband no longer goes fishing. The sea, the endless amniotic fluid, is not to be disturbed by the strokes of the oar.”⁵²

51. See *Die Löwen* Dec. 1975.

52. Export, “Those Who Are Not Painted Are Stupid.”

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