

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

SPATIAL EXPANSION - ANNA VOSWINKEL ON MARIANNE WEX AT TANYA LEIGHTON



"Dude ... Stop the Spread, Please – It's a space issue." With this billboard campaign, the New York Metro called attention to the problem of #manspreading, the habit of some, mostly male passengers, to take up several seats by spreading their legs. At the time of the inception of Marianne's artistic research project, currently shown at Tanya Leighton, this gender typical behaviour was by and large ignored or naturalized. A basic critique of the binary gender regime was not yet formulated, let alone scientifically established.

Marianne Wex had to find a form of her own to express her unease towards that dichotomous thinking. For her research on 'Female and Male Body language as a result of patriarchal structures' she photographed passersby in Hamburg's urban space between 1972 and 1977, capturing their unconscious body postures, to identify normative behavioural patterns.

She arranged her prints according to different poses and different body parts, formed rows, which she mounted onto large paper panels and combined corresponding to their social sex - male and female. Wex's intention was to expose this binary gender conception, which manifests in two adjustments she makes: For one thing, she included images from mass media such as advertising photos, pictures of celebrities and politicians, TV and film stills and pornographic images, which she assembled with the documentary photos as normative leitmotifs. On the other hand she referred to photographic reproduction of antique sculptures in her analysis to be able to draw historical comparisons, with regard to gender representation. These panels are complemented by texts, on which she touches upon the images and image groups and frames her conclusion. Lastly the work presented by means of panels, in which the artist props the images in two rows. The panel layout is modular, in principle: horizontally the image groups can be combined in various ways, there are different language versions of the text.

Yet the vertical arrangement of the images, with which Wex depicts the social hierarchy between men and women (as a result of patriarchal structures) remains immutable: men are always positioned above the women.

Those images, that depict atypically gendered gestures or a couple constellation, deviate from the norm – they literally break ranks. Another creative interference is produced by the individual formats; Wex cropped the six of the prints according to the space taken up by the person in the picture. While few men with much spatial freedom find themselves next to each other in the top ranks, the female passers-by and advertising models line up like in an involuntary dance revue. Thus, the formal framework strikingly underlines the desired availability of the female body.



Another study variation of her research work shows staged photographs with male and female models, which Wex asked to pose consciously in feminine and masculine postures. In her explanatory text Wex describes the reactions of the subjects: women, enjoying the demonstration of male attitudes, men, having difficulties to adopt female postures, as they considered them as restricting. The performance of another identity enables different experiences; body and consciousness cannot be separated from each other.

Wex's arrangement already anticipates experiments in 1990's art with gender theory, as Diane Torr's drag-king-workshops „Man for a day“.

She began her analysis of gender-normative body language in paintings, where she, inspired through Pop Art, copied cut outs of gestures and body postures from advertisements. At first she simply used her photographs as realistic templates for her paintings. Later she realized the advantage of serial photography to make social patterns recognizable. Wex combined photographed media images, which reduced reality to the image fetish of the consumer object, equally with her street photos. At the same time similar strategies were developed by other feminist artists, as Martha Rosler or Sanja Ivekovic.



Wex, who taught at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg from 1963 to 1980, understood her work with images as research, that she carried out with the artistic means available at the time. With this understanding of artistic practice she was ahead of her time. Her extensive visual examination of “‘Female’ and ‘Male’ Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures” was first presented in 1977 during the exhibition „Künstlerinnen International 1877–1977“ at the NGBK in Berlin. Two years later she published her work in extended form as a book, in both German and English. The title „Let's Take Back Our Space: Female and Male Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures“ emphasized the feminist activation potential, which was set up in the work. Most of NGBK's members apprehended Wex's photography installation exclusively as a feminist awareness program; only little recognized the work's artistic quality. Since then Wex's critical examination of gender norms has been taken up in art theory and social sciences - it isn't possible to clearly classify it in a dichotomous scheme of visual art or social science. This point reflects Wex's criticism of binary thinking, the “system of separation, which builds an essential pillar to the preservation of patriarchal structures,” as she phrases in the preface to her book.