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Two Slight Returns: Chauncey Hare and Marianne Wex

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Chauncey Hare, 'Richmond, California, 1969', 1969, photograph. Courtesy the artist and Steidl

Writing about the poet Aidan Andrew Dun, Iain Sinclair laid out a contradictory double-imperative: "The poet has a dual responsibility: to give himself over entirely to his work, and to stage-manage a career."¹ The formula is quintessentially Sinclairian: Romantic realpolitik. The first imperative might seem more palatable than the second, which it in any case excludes with that 'entirely' – but palatable only if we prefer our poets, or artists, to have vocations rather than careers.

For Chauncey Hare and Marianne Wex, the question of a career, of art as a profession, was unresolved in ways which have affected the legacy of their work, and even the legitimacy of categorising them as 'artists'. While they were contemporaries, making their most important work in the 1970s, they had little else obviously in common: Hare was a documentary photographer based in California; Wex was an artist and art teacher living in Hamburg. They never met, or exhibited together, nor were they even aware of one another's work. But in their choices, the vicissitudes of their reputations, and the political valencies of their work, there are parallels which suggest how vocations can unhinge careers, and how giving oneself over entirely to the work might mean abandoning it altogether.

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When Chauncey Hare staged a one-man protest outside the exhibition 'Mirrors and Windows' at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, he seemed to be entirely neglecting Sinclair's second imperative. The curator Jack van Euw, who oversaw the 2009 publication of a new Steidl edition of Hare's work called *Protest Photographs*, recalls being handed a leaflet by Hare as he stood in line for a lecture by the show's curator: 'I read his text and it crossed my mind that he was a lunatic.' Hare was

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Tanya Leighton

protesting, amongst other things, against Philip Morris's sponsorship of the show and the inclusion of one of his images in it. To von Euw, encountering Hare for the first time, it appeared to be straightforward 'career suicide'.²

Hare started out as a landscape photographer in his spare time, while working at the Chevron oil company in California. His experiences during a work assignment in Mississippi during the civil rights upheavals of 1967 were transformative, for both his politics and his photography, and the following year he began a series of portraits of people in their homes which became an exhibition and later a book, both with the title *Interior America*. Working in Oakland, California and the Sierra foothills, and subsequently in the Ohio valley where he had grown up, Hare focused mostly, though not exclusively, on working class homes; shooting with a wide-angle lens, his images divide their attention equally between the inhabitants and their decor. They are extraordinary photographs: compassionate but also formal and complex, constantly interested in the interiors as sets dressed for living, which are often themselves full of other framed images on the walls. Sometimes his subjects are posing, though rarely looking into camera; sometimes they asleep, or hypnotised by the glow of an out-of-shot television set.



Chauncey Hare, 'Cincinnati, Ohio, 1971', 1971, photograph. Courtesy the artist and Steidl

Hare felt, because of a study he had conducted into employee morale. Having retrained as a family therapist, he became a specialist in workplace abuse and published a book on the subject with his partner Judy Wyatt. He abandoned photography entirely and his previous body of work remained in storage until 1999, when he entered protracted negotiations to donate it to a public institution. Hare's stipulations – that the work could never be sold and that it could only be exhibited alongside one of two explanatory

Subsequently, Hare's focus shifted to the workplace and he took images at Chevron and around Silicon Valley, for a second book called *This Was Corporate America* (1985). But, despite receiving three Guggenheim grants to support his photography, he struggled to find teaching work and also found himself in conflict with his employers: he left Chevron, apparently after conflict over his documentation of the company's working practices, and was fired from a position at the Environmental Protection Agency, at least in part,

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statements he had written – meant at least one museum turned his donation down, before van Jack van Euw secured it for the Bancroft Library at the University of California.

It is hard to think of many careers less stage-managed than Hare's. Even in the afterword to *Protest Photographs*, van Euw is frank about the element of self-sabotage: 'Chauncey was so intent on getting his message across that he seemed to be stifling any other interpretation or engagement with his work.'³ Hare had always been acutely uncomfortable about the gap between the world of his subjects and the art world where their images circulated:

*From the beginning, I knew that to receive photo grants I was expected to present my photographs in a formal art way without accompanying text and to allow each of my photos to be used as a work of art that stands alone [...] The formal art process dehumanised the photographs by turning them into purely aesthetic objects. It allowed and valued only that reality attributed and defined by the viewer.*⁴

Hare identified himself with his subjects, and moreover identified his images with them too – selling prints, he said, 'would have felt like selling the people'.⁵

Hare's images themselves, however, are more ambivalent than all this would suggest. Discussing how welcoming people generally were when he asked to photograph them in their homes, Hare writes: 'Easy entry meant I had a responsibility to honour what I saw and photographed – especially when I used a wide angle lens that took in more than what people thought I was photographing.'⁶ Many of the images testify to that slight deception, and it is part of what makes them compelling, but it complicates, or qualifies, Hare's idea of responsibility. Similarly, Hare's close identification of the people with their images is strange insofar as they are not named in the captions (only the place and date of the photograph, when known). Their particularity slides into something else – Hare himself calls them 'archetypal images of America'.⁷ *Protest Photographs* shimmers with the tension between the claim implied by its title and the much more classical, and irreducibly aesthetic, appeal of many of its images.

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Around the same time that Hare was protesting outside SFMoMA, a very different photography book was published in Germany. It was by an artist called Marianne Wex and its full title was 'Let's Take Back Our Space: 'Female' and 'Male' Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures (1979)'. Wex had started out as a painter, but an interest in body language had sent her out into the streets of Hamburg in the early 1970s with her Mamiya camera, where she had started to take pictures of people unawares at train stations and street crossings. After she had taken around 3,000 photographs, she began to sort them according to typologies of body language and to observe the differences between the sexes. While continuing to take more images, she also started to research ancient and mediaeval statuary as a record of previous era's 'ideals', and to plunder contemporary media images too.

Let's Take Back Our Space is organised thematically. The first half of the book focuses on contemporary images and groups them by posture ('Seated persons, leg and feet positions', 'Standing persons, arm and hand positions', etc.). On the left hand of each spread, images of men in a given posture run along the top and of women along the bottom; the right hand spread tends to be sparser, often reserved for one or two 'exceptions' to the stereotypically gendered gestures. The second half focuses on statuary and includes a number of short texts on art history,

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Marianne Wex, excerpt from 'Let's Take Back Our Space', 1979. Courtesy the artist

gender and socialisation, and accounts of Wex's own experiences.

As a whole, the book features a bewildering array of photographic source material: Wex's street photographs, photojournalism, advertisements, art historical reproductions, family album snapshots, pornography, mail order catalogue clippings, publicity shots, television and film stills, etc. Wex crops and juxtaposes the images purely according to their gestural content, and with a ruthless wit – for example, on page 102 we find a man standing on a field of bodies, Jewish victims of Nazi genocide, juxtaposed with, amongst others, a muscleman from a home exercise ad and a tourist on a Bangkok beach in similar poses. At such moments her work takes on an affinity with Hans-Peter Feldmann, otherwise a very different artist, while at other times there are clear parallels with feminist contemporaries like Martha Rosler and Sanja Iveković.

Like Hare, Wex's project derives part of its dynamic from its apparent contradictions. Its repetitions and reiterations can make the conventional postures it is resisting seem archetypal, inescapable; in defence of individuality, it presents serried ranks of stereotypes. There is something of Hare, too, in the vestigial echo of voyeurism: if his images encompass more than his subjects were aware of, hers were, for the most part, completely unwitting (which was necessary, as she pointed out, to capture unconscious postures). And its sheer exhaustiveness is offset by its idiosyncratic categorisations, the exuberant subjectivity of its taxonomies. This last characteristic was something Wex was very conscious of, and understood as an attempt to overcome the separation between the sciences and everyday existence: 'knowledge is gathered in single fields without checking the relationships within the individual fields. And all of this happens while bracketing out the so-called personal feelings'.⁸



Marianne Wex, excerpt from 'Let's Take Back Our Space', 1979. Courtesy the artist

Wex's project originally took the form of dozens of large collaged panels, which were first exhibited as part of 'Kunstlerinnen International 1877–1977' at NGBK in Berlin in 1977. It was well received and various elements of it were included in shows internationally over the following years, including one at the ICA in London in the early 1980s. Wex, however, was already turning away from her art practice by the time the book version of her work was published. Around the beginning of the period when she began making

Tanya Leighton

Let's Take Back Our Space, Wex had been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness; after the book was published she travelled widely and investigated alternative medicine, during which time her condition worsened before finally going into remission. Subsequently, she studied for several years under a natural healer called Lily Cornford in London, and for the last two decades she has given seminars on self-healing to small groups of women all around Europe, often drawing on what she felt she had learnt during the 1970s about the effects of compartment on women's physical and mental health. Her work served her as a teaching aid, while remaining otherwise out of circulation.

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In many ways, Wex's project was diametrically opposed to Hare's. Hare was concerned, ostensibly at least, with individuals, whereas Wex was interested in patterns and stereotypes; Hare's images are expansive, trying to register every incidental detail, whereas Wex's are reduced and cropped to serve illustrative purposes (some are reversed horizontally, for example, to make the homologies clearer); Hare's subjects are always located within space, whereas the only locus for Wex's is their own bodies; and so on.

What the two share, nevertheless, is a kind of career trajectory: from increasingly politicised art-making to an abandonment of the role of artist altogether in favour of therapeutic practices, in the broadest sense. Hare, as well as setting himself in opposition to the 'formal art process', rejects even the label of 'photographer': 'I do not now see myself as a "photographer", but as a working person who has made photographs for a short period of his life.'⁹ Wex, for her part, 'didn't mind if it was called art, any art to me is research'.¹⁰ Feeling that almost all of the artistic and conceptual tools she had inherited were derived from patriarchal forms, she resolved to, 'put all my energies in creating new forms with other women [and] stop concerning myself with the analysis of the world of men'.¹¹

Abandoning art, importantly, is not the same as apostasy. Neither Hare nor Wex has taken the well-established anti-career path of the wayward *poète maudit*, glorifying renunciation; we are a long way from Rimbaud giving up poetry for gun-running. Hare and Wex both seem to have felt vocations ('the signals that came from inside,' as Hare puts it) that called them through and then beyond art, at a moment when 'socially-engaged' or 'research-based' practices were not on the career menu for artists – while at the same time more contingent factors (conflict at work, illness) affected their choices. Their subsequent abandonment of art practice, and of any stage-managing of their erstwhile art careers, in each case helped to condemn their considerable bodies of work to relative obscurity. In fact, their subsequent careers perhaps retroactively contributed to this process too: therapy and healing are things contemporary art tends to keep at arm's length, perceiving them as too connected to ideas of instrumentalised self-expression and catharsis.¹²

Reviewing *Interior America* for the *New Yorker* in 1979, Janet Malcolm compared it to Walker Evans and Robert Frank's work, but concluded cautiously, 'it is too early to tell about Hare's place in photography'.¹³ For over two decades that place has been very marginal. It is only fairly recently, with the Steidl publication and the first exhibition of Hare's work in Europe – some of the *Interior America* images featured in the show 'Anonymes', curated by David Company and Diane Dufour, at Le Bal in Paris last year – that Hare's work has begun to receive serious attention again. Wex's book is long out of print and the original panels had been in storage at the Bildwechsel archive of women's art in Hamburg, until a small selection were included in a show which I curated for Focal Point Gallery in Southend in the UK in 2009; the gallery subsequently published a small catalogue, with reproductions from the original book and newly commissioned essays.

The strip-mining of 'lost' artists of the 1960s and 1970s has become a small industry. The most telling

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example is perhaps Lee Lozano, who made ‘dropping out’ of the art world into a self-cancelling performance at the time, but whose work has undergone spectacular reappraisal. But simple acts of restitution and revaluation, however merited, risk papering over the fissures into which those artists’ careers had fallen in the first place – not least because, in many cases, those fissures remain. The slight returns which are no such a feature of contemporary art’s relationship to its past should not fool us into forgetting the gaps, lapses, occlusions and omissions which necessitated them in the first place.

Similarly, if individual artworks or bodies of work are ‘orphaned’ by artists’ later life choices, then they pass down to us with a set of perplexingly familiar but intractable questions: about life and work, intention and history. What, for example, would Hare or Wex’s images look like considered instead as part of a life practice, a continuum with what they chose to do since they stopped making them? Are artists really, ultimately, responsible for their own reputations? And are we any better equipped now than thirty years ago to answer what it really means to have a career in art – or, for that matter, to abandon one?

*Thanks to [Steidl & Partners](#) for allowing the use of two images from *Protest Photographs* by Chauncey Hare (2009).*

Footnotes

1. Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out For The Territory*, London: Granta, 1997, p.154.↑
2. Chauncey Hare, *Protest Photographs*, Gottingen: Steidl, 2009, p.369.↑
3. *Ibid.*, p.372.↑
4. *Ibid.*, p.16.↑
5. *Ibid.*↑
6. *Ibid.*, p.14.↑
7. *Ibid.*, p.16.↑
8. Marianne Wex, ‘*Let’s Take Back Our Space*’ (trans. Joahanna Albert with Susan Schultz), Hamburg: Frauenliteraturverlag Hermine Fees, 1979, p.10.↑
9. C. Hare, *Protest Photographs*, *op. cit.*, p.20.↑
10. Interview with the author, August 2009. Audio of the interview is available at <http://www.focalpoint.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/13/>↑
11. M. Wex, ‘*Let’s Take Back Our Space*’, *op. cit.*, p.350.↑
12. Therapy remains permissible, of course, when clearly introduced and neutralised as subject matter.↑
13. Janet Malcolm, ‘Slouching Towards Bethlehem, PA’, *The New Yorker*, 6 August 1979, p.80.↑

Comments

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