

frieze

Marianne Wex

BADISCHER KUNSTVEREIN



Marianne Wex Extract from the book *Let's Take Back our Space. "Female" and "Male" Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures*, 1979

Amassed between 1972 and 1977, Marianne Wex's collated image bank, "Weibliche" und "männliche" Körpersprache als Folge patriarchalischer Machtverhältnisse ('Female' and 'Male' Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures), is a scrupulous study of 'gendered' kinesics in photography. In this show, co-curated by the Badischer Kunstverein and Mike Sperlinger, Wex's own photographs of unsuspecting members of the public, originally taken as research for her paintings, were interspersed with pictures from advertisements, German newspapers and magazines (such as Stern and Der Spiegel), as well as examples of historical figuration. In nearly 5,000 photographs in total, the anonymous rub shoulders with celebrities and politicians.

Wex organized these collected photographs in numerous categories and subcategories according to specific postures shared between the sexes, such as 'Bein und Fußhaltungen' (Leg and Foot Positions) or 'Körpergewicht auf beiden Beinen. Hacken im Abstand. Fußspitzen weit geöffnet' (Body Weight on Both Legs. Heels Apart. Feet Spread Wide). She detailed these variations, similarities and differences in an extensive vocabulary of physical expression. Affixing them to panels of various sizes, Wex placed the images of men above women in uniform linearity, symbolizing the patriarchal structure in which the project was contextualized.

At the Badischer Kunstverein, the majority of the original panels were shown for the first time in their near entirety since being included in several prominent exhibitions in Germany in the late 1970s (Wex originally presented this work in 1977 as part of 'Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977' at NGBK in Berlin), culminating with a show at London's ICA in 1982. Sperlinger and the Kunstverein recovered many of the panels from the Bildwechsel women artists' archive in Hamburg, and the Kunstverein team restored them, although a few are still damaged. The panels in the exhibition were installed on a newly

commissioned freestanding display structure designed by architect Andreas Müller and artist Ruth Buchanan, which snaked through the building's several rooms – a nimble system that never fully revealed the entirety of Wex's expansive project at once.

While the exhibition display gave the work a contemporary aesthetic, the project itself very much reflects the time in which it was constructed. A typical portrait of a male would be that of stolid, proud character, whereas women seem to be generally portrayed as either pretty or self-restrained. Considering their historical context, Wex's juxtapositions seem to suggest that women embodied their 'femininity' as much as men did their 'masculinity'. Do these distinctions still hold up today? The relevance of showing this particular work now – so rooted is it in the 1970s – is that we are asked to consider whether, or how, hierarchical social conditioning of the unconscious body has changed in the past 40 years. The exhibition also raised the notion of whether taxonomy is still crucial to contemporary understanding. In the era in which Wex made this work, it was discussed as either 'research' or 'art'. Such indexical art practices were being used predominantly by male Conceptual artists. Yet Wex's project is also still very reflexively revealing to the viewer. One's own individualized body can easily be read into her photographs – an illuminating effect on behaviour that usually feels ubiquitous and embedded.

It was interesting to note the occasional exceptions within groupings, which Wex sometimes separated out from the other images – for example, a man whose poise might appear effeminate, or an elderly woman whose attitude seems more masculine in disposition. These could be read in terms of a possible development of androgyny within society. The panel "Männliche" Posen ('Masculine' Poses) shows staged photographs of men and women who, under the instruction of Wex, were asked to pose as the opposite sex. The results are amusing: men look particularly awkward and embarrassed, while many of the women – including Wex's teenage daughter – pretend to be men with exaggerated confidence, mocking machismo.

Today, at the age of 75, Wex no longer practices as an artist. After being diagnosed with a critical illness around the time she made this work, she spent the subsequent years seeking alternative forms of medicine. Since the late '80s she has taught and run seminars and workshops in self-healing, sometimes even referring back to this project. Seeing the work in view of how Wex's life has developed, this image bank becomes a physical manifestation of itself; her research used as a therapeutic process for the emancipation of actual bodies within tangible space.

Saim Demircan

FRIEZE, October 2012