

MARIANNE WEX
LET'S TAKE BACK OUR SPACE
11 JANUARY – 17 FEBRUARY 2018

Tanya Leighton is pleased to present the first solo exhibition in Berlin of Marianne Wex's pioneering project about male and female body language, Let's Take Back Our Space: 'Female' and 'Male' Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures, 1977. The encyclopedic, multi-panel installation was first shown 40 years ago in a group exhibition about women's art at the neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin. Widely celebrated at the time of its debut, Wex's provocative image of all-pervasive everyday patriarchy now seems more acutely relevant than ever.

Originally a painter, inspired by both the figuration of Paula Modersohn-Becker and pop art, Wex's research into body language led her gradually towards photography. Several years of gathering images in the streets of Hamburg in the mid-1970s produced a collection of more than 5000, which Wex supplemented with images rephotographed from art history catalogues as well as mass media; photojournalism, advertisements, pornography, mail order catalogue clippings, and publicity shots. From this enormous image bank, Wex constructed 'Let's Take Back Our Space', a speculative and polemical history of body language and physiology, extending backwards from the present to ancient Egypt.

Wex's project takes the form of hundreds of collages, of different widths but uniform height, organised into separate male and female panels and displayed in parallel rows. These are rigorously subdivided according to different postures and poses, revealing how gender stereotypes percolate down to our most intimate everyday gestures. The occasional 'exceptions' - figures whose photos float above or below the rows - only serve to emphasise the incredible conformity discovered by Wex, from the street to the boardroom. Again and again, power differentials can be observed simply in the amount of space people feel entitled to occupy - 'manspreading' avant la lettre.

Speaking about her work, Wex notes that her endeavor was "based on the assumption that body language is the result of sex-oriented, patriarchal socialization, affecting all of our 'feminine' and 'masculine' role behavior." Her discovery was that "body language and bodily ideals between sexes have become increasingly divergent."

The resulting body of photographic collages is unique: they combine the history of street photography and the typologies of the Becher School with conceptual art imperatives, especially in their possibilities for modular recombination. 'Let's Take Back Our Space' might be classified, non-exhaustively, as a feminist broadside, an encyclopedia of gesture, an ethnographic portrait of Hamburg in the 1970s, a genealogical tract on art history, a neglected classic of appropriation art and a kind of autobiography.

Marianne Wex was born in 1937 in Hamburg, Germany. She studied at the Academies of Art in Hamburg and Mexico City, and was a professor at the Academy of Art, Hamburg from 1963 to 1980. 'Let's Take Back Our Space' was first shown as part of 'Women Artists International 1877-1977' at nGbK, Berlin. Wex's work was shown for the first time in decades at Focal Point Gallery, Southend in 2009 and then in a more comprehensive form at the Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe in 2012. Other recent exhibitions include Galeria Zacheta, National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland; Adam Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand; Gasworks, London; La Galerie - centre d'art contemporain, Noisy-le-Sec, Paris; and Yale Union, Portland, United States.

The exhibition has been developed in collaboration with Mike Sperlinger, Professor of Theory and Writing at the National Academy of the Arts, Oslo.

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