

MARIANNE WEX

An Exhibition

Some comment in advance of the exhibition, as plain and bare as we can make it: In some circles, Marianne Wex is famous for not being famous enough, in other circles she's a sociological footnote, and in still other circles, she does not exist. Historical snack food is no more acceptable here than anywhere else, but every so often, some less-known work comes speaking to us so loudly that we take ourselves out of the narrow confines of our own time and motion into the past tense.

The show is a single visual polemic. From 1972 to 1977, Wex rolled the stone of her commitment uphill and compiled an archive. She took thousands of banal and clandestine photographs of women and men in the streets of Hamburg.[§] She re-photographed magazines and newspapers, advertisements, art-historical reproductions, her television. She took whatever was in reach. She arranged the results on her dotted line and collaged them into large paste-up panels and a book, a kind of expanded sibling entitled *Let's Take Back Our Space: "Female" and "Male" Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures* (1979). At the center of both the panels and the book is a wide disputation about how we create and present ourselves, and the degree to which gender-specific conditioning and hierarchies are reflected through everyday pose, gesture, and pre-verbal communication.

Her insistency on meaning has been a stumbling block for some viewers who would prefer to think the work single-minded. But to judge it solely by its frozen message of second-wave feminism is to ignore one's own ambition as a viewer. It is also to ignore the way that works of art naturally progress from intention to elsewhere. Artists,

try as they might, can't nail meaning in place, so thirty-five years later, we're left with the work's frontal voice and everything it has come to say in spite of itself. We might then think of it non-exhaustively as an encyclopedia of gesture; an anthropological portrait of Hamburg in the 1970s; a monomaniacal tract on art history; a neglected classic of appropriation aesthetics; a treatise on photography and editing; an autobiography; an exorcism.*

Marianne Wex was born in 1937 in Hamburg, Germany. She now lives in Höhr-Grenzhausen. She studied at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg and taught there from 1963 to 1980. The photo panels were originally shown at NGBK in West Berlin in 1977. Soon after, Wex stopped practicing as a visual artist, and the panels were not shown again until 2009 at Focal Point Gallery in London. This is her first exhibition in the United States.

[§]Wex took the street photographs with a medium format camera. She shot the newspaper and magazine clippings in her apartment on a copy stand and processed all the photographs in her bathtub. She pasted the photos onto cardboard panels and housed them in plastic sleeves.

Bibliography

Addison, Joseph. *The Spectator* 2, no. 407 (June 17, 1712).

Agamben, Giorgio. “Notes on Gesture.” In *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron. London: Verso, 1993.

Akerman, Chantal. Interview. *Frauen und Film* (March 1976).

Of course you still hear, “Oh a woman did that,” and “women are soft and sweet as honey.” But when women concretize their modes of seeing, the result is very vehement, very violent. It is just that this voice manifests itself differently than it does with men. Women’s violence is not commercial, it is beyond description.

Armantrout, Rae. “Special Theory of Relativity.” *The Invention of Hunger*. Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 1979.

SPECIAL THEORY OF RELATIVITY

You know those ladies in old photographs? Well, say one stares into your room as if into the void beyond her death in 1913

Benjamin, Walter. “Little History of Photography.” In *Selected Writings Vol. 2 1927–1934*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972.

Berwick Street Collective. *The Nighcleaners*. 16mm, 90 min. 1975.

Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. “From Faktura to Factography.” *October* 30 (fall 1984).

———. “Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive.” *October* 88 (spring 1999).

Burgin, Victor. “Looking at Photographs.” *Tracks* 3 (fall 1977).

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.

———. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* London: Routledge, 1993.

Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1, no. 4 (summer 1976).

Let me insert here a parenthetical remark. I mean it when I speak of male writing. I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as *marked* writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that is frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never *her* turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.

Crimp, Douglas. *Pictures*. New York: Artist Space, 1977.

Darwin, Charles. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. London: John Murray, 1872.

Davey, Moyra. *Long Life Cool White*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2008.

There is a seduction to the editorial use of photographs: surround almost any image with type and it takes on an allure, an authority, provokes a desire it might otherwise not have. What is this appeal, exactly? The seduction of language, of the symbolic? Is it that, as Benjamin and Brecht speculated, photographs are more at home with, even in need of, words?

DeWitt, Helen. *The Last Samurai*. New York: Hyperion, 2000.

Flusser, Vilém. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books, 1983.

The act of photography is that of “phenomenological doubt,” to the extent that it attempts to approach phenomena from any number of viewpoints... Two aspects are decisive for this doubt. First: Photographers’ practice is hostile to ideology. Ideology is the insistence on a single viewpoint thought to be perfect. Photographers act in a post-ideological way even when they think they are serving an ideology. Second: Photographers’ practice is fixed to a program. Photographers can only act within the program of the camera, even when they think they are acting in opposition to this program. This is true of all post-industrial acts: They are “phenomenological” in the sense of being hostile to ideology, and they are programmed acts.

Fogle, Douglas, ed. *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–1982*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Dress of Women: A Critical Introduction to the Symbolism and Sociology of Clothing*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002. (Originally published in *The Forerunner*, 1915).

Our clothing is as literally evolved to meet our needs as the scales of a fish or the feathers of a bird. It grows on us, socially, as theirs grow on them individually.

Because we manufacture a substance, consciously and through a number of hands and brains, it is none the less a natural product of society.

Because a substance or implement does not physiologically grow on us, it may be nevertheless an integral part of the social tissues; and, equally may be a superfluous, a detrimental part, or a positive disease and danger.

Clothing studied in this way, is a sort of social skin, adapting itself to conditions of heat and cold as do the coverings of other animals, only more quickly. If the polar bear in our menageries could take off his underflannels; or if the equatorial monkeys could put them on—they would suffer somewhat less.

But our clothing, through its changeability and its variety, has become, even more than is an epidermis, a medium of expression. The most our skin can do, to show emotion, is to blush, to pale, to contract so that the hair rises; but with clothing we may express a whole gamut of emotions from personal vanity to class consciousness.

Gombrich, Ernst H. and Fritz Saxl. *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*. London: The Warburg Institute, 1970.

Hajas, Tibor. *Self Fashion Show*. Budapest: Balázs Béla Filmstúdió. 35mm, 15 min. 1976.

Iveković, Sanja. *Double Life 1959–1975*. Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1976.

Katzman, Lisa. “The All-Around Reduced Personality: Redupers. Women’s Art in Public.” *Jump Cut* 29 (February 1984).

Kelly, Mary. *Post-Partum Document*. 1973–1979.

Kruger, Barbara. “Incorrect.” *Effects*, no. 1 (summer 1983).

Photography has saturated us as spectators from its inception amidst a mingling of laboratorial pursuits and magic acts to its current status as propagator of convention, cultural

commodity, and global hobby. Images are made palpable, ironed flat by technology and, in turn, dictate the seemingly real through the representative. And it is this representative, through its appearance and cultural circulation, that detonates issues and raises questions. Is it possible to construct a way of looking which welcomes the presence of pleasure and escapes the deceptions of desire? How do we, as women and as artists, navigate through the marketplace that constructs and contains us? I see my work as a series of attempts to ruin certain representations and to welcome a female spectator into the audience of men. If this work is considered “incorrect,” all the better, for my aims to undermine that singular pontificating male voiceover which “correctly” instructs our pleasures and histories or lack of them. I am wary of the seriousness and confidence of knowledge. I am concerned with who speaks and with who is silent: with what is seen and what is not. I think about inclusions and multiplicities, not oppositions, binary indictments, and warfare. I’m not concerned with pitting morality against immorality, as “morality” can be seen as a compendium of allowances inscribed within patriarchy, within its repertoire of postures and legalities. But then, of course, there’s really no “within” patriarchy because there’s certainly no “without” patriarchy. I am interested in works that address these material conditions of our lives: that recognize the uses and abuses of power on both an intimate and global level. I want to speak, show, see, and hear outrageously astute questions and comments. I want to be on the sides of pleasure and laughter and to disrupt the dour certainties of pictures, property, and power.

Lavater, Johann Caspar. *Physiognomy; or The Corresponding Analogy between the Conformation of the Features and the Ruling Passions of the Mind*. London: Cowie, Low and Co. in the Poultry, 1826.

Levin, Dana. “Who is Who: Pronouns, Gender, and Merging Selves.” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (Aug. 9, 2012).

Lippard, Lucy R. *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art*. New York: Dutton, 1976.

Morris, Errol. *Believing is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2011.

———. Interview. *The Believer* 2, no. 3 (April 2004).

What I don’t like about *vérité* is this claim that somehow you’re guaranteed truthfulness by virtue of style. That’s my complaint. That somehow because a picture has been made in a certain way—handheld, available light, fly on the wall—that somehow it becomes more truthful as a result. I respectfully disagree....I don’t believe that you can talk about a photograph being *true* or *false*. I don’t think such a claim has any meaning. You can talk about a

caption underneath a photograph being true or false, because there is a linguistic element. You can claim that a photograph is a picture of a horse or a cow, but it is the sentence that expresses the claim, which is true or false, not the photograph. Truth and falsity is something that concerns language, it’s a property of language. Not of photographs, per se.

Muybridge, Eadweard. *Muybridge’s Complete Human and Animal Locomotion, Vols. 1–3*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1979. (Originally published in 1887).

Okrent, Arika. “Body Language.” *Lapham’s Quarterly* (Spring 2012).

Olesen, Henrik. *Some Faggy Gestures*. Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2008.

Paley, Grace. *The Little Disturbances of Man*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Don’t mix me up with biology. Look at me, what do you see?

Panofsky, Erwin. *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955.

When an acquaintance greets me on the street by lifting his hat, what I see from a formal point of view is nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of color, lines and volumes which constitutes my world of vision. When I identify, as I automatically do, this configuration as an object (gentleman), and the change of detail as an event (hat-lifting), I have already overstepped the limits of purely formal perception and entered a first sphere of subject matter or meaning...

Post, Emily. *Etiquette*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1922.

Do not attract attention to yourself in public. This is one of the fundamental rules of good breeding. Shun conspicuous manners, conspicuous clothes, a loud voice, staring at people, knocking into them, talking across anyone—in a word do not attract attention to yourself. Do not expose your private affairs, feelings or innermost thoughts in public. You are knocking down the walls of your house when you do.

Rich, Adrienne. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*. New York: Norton, 1979.

Rifkin, Adrian. “Can the Subaltern Wave?” In *Let’s Take Back Our Space*. London: Focal Point Gallery, 2009.

We can begin to see why Wex had to make space for those alternatives: the images of young people breaking the rules, doing men as women and women as men, as well as the frames of exceptions to each rule; because

this historical universal that she tracks through histories of the world to the end of her making art can only be of value if it is false, if we can will it to be escaped, and ourselves to be other to its claims on truthfulness. That is, we learn from Wex that the performed is a matter of both inevitability and of volition and that what we have learned, rather by rote, to call the “performative” was itself always an aporia of belonging and not-belonging to history and to oneself.

This is the kind of knowledge that art brings long before theory has dreamed of it and then, all too often, theory takes it away and tries to offer it back to art, as a way of understanding it. In *Let’s Take Back Our Space*, Wex executes both these gestures, of explaining and of showing, but her showing involves a repetition that makes of her, despite herself, a master of high conceptualism, like so many other women of her time—and which also inscribes a deep and lasting irony at the very heart of the book.

Rosler, Martha. “In, Around and Afterthoughts on Documentary Photography.” In *3 Works*. Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981.

...The well-entrenched paradigm in which a documentary image has two moments: (1) the “immediate,” instrumental one, in which an image is caught or created out of the stream of the present and held up as testimony, as evidence in the most legalistic of senses, arguing for or against a social practice and its ideological-theoretical supports, and (2) the conventional “aesthetic-historical” moment, less definable in its boundaries, in which the viewer’s argumentativeness cedes to the organismic pleasure afforded by the aesthetic “rightness” or well-formedness (not necessarily formal) of the image. This second moment is ahistorical in its refusal of *specific* historical meaning, yet “history minded” in its very awareness of the pastness of the time in which the image was made. This covert *appreciation* of images is dangerous insofar as it accepts *not* a dialectical relation between political and formal meaning, not their interpenetration, but a hazier, more reified relation, one in which topicality drops away as epochs fade, and the aesthetic aspect is, if anything, enhanced by the loss of specific reference (although there remains, perhaps, a cushioning backdrop of vague social sentiments limiting the “mysteriousness” of the image). I would argue against the possibility of a nonideological aesthetic; any response to an image is inevitably rooted in social knowledge—specifically, in social understanding of cultural products.

Rowbotham, Sheila. *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.

Sander, August. *Face of Our Time*. Munich: Schirmer Mosel, 2008. (Originally published 1929).

Sander, Helke. “Feminism and Film.” Trans. Ramona Curry. *Jump Cut* 27 (1982).

Scott, Joan Wallach. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." In *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Sekula, Allan. "The Traffic in Photographs." *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (spring 1981).

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973.

Even if incompatible with intervention in a physical sense, using a camera is still a form of participation. Although the camera is an observation station, the act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening. To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged (at least for as long as it takes to get a "good" picture), to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting...

There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed....

A new sense of the notion of information has been constructed around the photographic image. The photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time. In a world ruled by photographic images, all borders ("framing") seem arbitrary. Anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else: All that is necessary is to frame the subject differently. (Conversely, anything can be made adjacent to anything else.) Photography reinforces a nominalist view of social reality as consisting of small units of an apparently infinite number—as the number of photographs that could be taken of anything is unlimited. Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers*. The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery. Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination. The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: "There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way." Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy....

*Sperlinger, Mike. "Two Slight Returns: Chauncey Hare and Marianne Wex." *Aferall* (April 19, 2011).

The book's sheer exhaustiveness is offset by its idiosyncratic categorizations, 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 between the individual fields. And all of this happens while bracketing out the so-called personal feelings..."†

Abandoning art, importantly, is not the same as apostasy. Wex has not 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. Wex seems to have felt vocations ('the signals that came from inside,' as Chauncey Hare puts it) that called her 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 (her illness) affected her choice. Her subsequent abandonment of art practice, and of any stage-managing of her erstwhile art career, helped to condemn her considerable body of work to relative obscurity...

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 Wex's images look like considered instead as part of a life practice, a continuum with what she chose to do since she 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?

† Marianne Wex, *Let's Take Back Our Space: "Female" and "Male" Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures*. Trans. Johanna Albert with Susan Schultz. Hamburg: Frauenliteraturverlag Hermine Fees, 1979, p.10.

Vishmidt, Marina. "Redemption of Pose." In *Let's Take Back Our Space*. London: Focal Point Gallery, 2009.

The circulation of the archive as a book and as a portable exhibition format meant that Wex never really considered her work to be beholden to the legitimation of art sites or discourse; considering all art to be research, she did not care whether her research was considered as art. But the knowledge it produces is not always programmatic, nor recuperable as a sort of artisanal social science. *Let's Take Back Our Space*, in its vertiginous extent and proliferation of typologies, is wild and bureaucratic in the same breath. The logic of the categories veers from whim to rigor, though it never feels second-order or mimetic like much "austere art" of the time, but more like the determination to follow through on a vagrant impulse.

Wex, Marianne. "Body Language." In *Künstlerinnen International 1877–1977*. Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 1977.

—. "What is Women's Art? A Study of Figurative Representations in Women's Art and Men's Art of the Last Fifteen Years." In *Künstlerinnen International 1877–1977*. Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 1977.

A particularly important function is ascribed to the so-called exceptions [on the panels]. They obscure the regularity of the processes, serve as an alibi and thereby serve the further solidification of the foundational principle. Additionally, the mechanism used by the system demands the illusion of exceptions, of the struggles of the individual, a very important aspect, because we are easier to manipulate when we remain alone and separate from one another. This doesn't mean that the struggle for each individual is unimportant. I just want to point out the danger that ensues when we do not fight as a collective conscious, instead believing that we can escape the societal forces alone. We can only achieve changes that go above and beyond the moment when we start from the basis of our commonality.

Through our study of women's art and men's art, I have become more uncertain of my own artistic work. Due to newly gained knowledge, I must now call into question everything that I have worked on up until now. That does not mean that I view my earlier work as meaningless. On the contrary, I see all my previous work as a sign for certain conditions and situations that cannot lose their value through insights gained later on. It is clear to me that I would not have been able to realize this project and my work on body language without the support and engagement of the feminist movement.

MARIANNE WEX is curated by Robert Snowden and Hope Svenson.

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Thursday–Saturday, 1–7pm

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