This is not my body

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Indeed there are not two genders, there is only one, the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general.¹

These two sentences, written by Monique Wittig in 1983, pronounce a regime of visibility and invisibility for the feminine in language. They can also be applied to the image. They signal, to me, one of the major shifts, or even one of the major ‘kicks’, that women artists have delivered against the classical thinking of visibility and invisibility in the iconic image, even before second-wave feminism began to redefine the very notion of the ‘canon’.² Women artists have been undoing the autonomy and the universality of the aesthetic image, by developing their art, not only for the production of effects in signification or communication, but as a form of agency.

Difference and the ‘neighbourhood’ of the sexes

Let’s exchange, for a moment, visibility for invisibility. The French 1979 paperback edition of Roland Barthes’s Le Degré zéro de l’écriture features on the front an artwork which generally goes unnoticed. Inside one finds a caption which quite imprecisely says: ‘Painted relief by Sophie Taeuber-Arp, 1938.’ A woman artist is in the foreground but stays more or less invisible. Yve-Alain Bois’s essay ‘Sophie Taeuber-Arp Against Greatness’ discussing her depictions of white shapes in relief, which figure in the catalogue of the exhibition: Inside the Visible (an elliptical traverse of 20th century art, in of and from the feminine) notes the near invisibility of the artist, this ‘maker of works as beautiful and intelligent as Relief rectangulaire, Cercles Découpés or Cônes surgissants with its cut out background and menacingly protruding elements.’³ Yet Sophie Taeuber (1889–1943) went unnoticed for almost fifty years. This didn’t happen to Hans Arp, an artist who always admitted he owed her much. They lived together. But there was more to this artistic couple. There was a common wish for anonymity, a refusal to be named as singular authors. Their work in common culminated in a threesome with producer Theo Van Doesburg in the painted decoration of L’Aubette in Strasbourg, which eventually added to the invisibility of this woman artist in art history.

Sophie Taeuber has a much more interesting œuvre than this account of her life as a victim of patriarchy suggests. She is one of the most compelling artists of the twentieth century, partly because she extended her production into multiple fields, encompassing dance and performance, puppet theatre, textile design – the so-called ‘feminine’ disciplines; although Hans made textiles and embroidery, too. She was commissioned to design for a gallery, an office, villas and apartments, and of course, for the entertainment complex of L’Aubette, but she also supervised the construction of the couple’s home and studios in Clamart-Meudon. She involved herself in teaching, in arts counselling, in journalism as an editor of the magazine Plastique, and she was the first woman artist to be taken into account at the Black Mountain College. She also provided for cultural exchange between France and Poland and visited herself the avant-garde museum Sztuki in Lodz. The exchange of roles seems to have happened on many occasions in the activities of the couple.

In the Tondo relief on the cover of Le Degré zéro, neither painting nor sculpture, which looks like a maquette as well as a finished work – a far more interesting ambiguity than with the first one – the questions go back and forth from contiguity to continuity: a paradox with which Sophie plays. She works with several layers, irregular portions of ellipses and discs, which suggest a life of their own, a rotation of their own, and a common displacement. As Yve-Alain Bois suggests, ‘these works are highly compositional, but the composition itself is given as transient’.⁴ This implies vocabularies other than formal ones. The pairs ‘continuity/contiguity’ and ‘compositional/transient’ are at work and play a role in undoing the paradigm of sexual difference.

The difference between the sexes was one of the most passionately discussed issues of the twentieth century. In the late 1990s, notably in France, with debates on gay marriage and homosexual kinship, it was made into a principle transcending all other dualism in
Western thought. Even some non-religious ‘experts’ of the Left raised their voices in order to maintain the ‘Symbolic Order’, invoking Jacques Lacan as well as Claude Lévi-Strauss, as the Names of the Fathers. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship (de la parenté)* became dogma. The ‘specialists’ were to talk as social scientists, as anthropologists, like Françoise Héritier, as psychoanalysts, like Julia Kristeva, or as philosophers, like Sylviane Agacinski, when they raised their voices against what they would call a rupture with the Law. Françoise Héritier, for instance, as a (famous) anthropologist, asserted that sexual difference is at the ground of the creation of the fundamental opposition that enables us to think. For thinking is first to classify, to classify is first to discriminate, and the fundamental discrimination is based on the ‘difference des sexes’. This is an irreducible fact: one cannot argue that these differences don’t exist; they are impassable ‘end stops’ of thought, as day and night. Our modes of thinking and our social organizations are thus based on the principal observation of the difference between the sexes.5

This discourse was countered by feminist anthropologists and psychoanalysts, such as Sabine Prokhoris, who in her book *Le Sexe prescrit*, challenges the very notion of sexual difference as ‘observed’: ‘a difference isn’t some thing but a way within other possible manners, to interpret, to treat, the relation and thus the discrepancy between things observed’.6 Therefore, she writes, why not observe it through the effects of resemblance or neighbourhood, for instance? That Sophie and Hans thrived collaboratively making or exchanging collages, textile designs, wood sculpture, or drawing ‘with four hands’, constitutes for me a good example of this *voisinage*; not in marital life, but in collaborative works. In the series of *Duo Collages*, for instance, they worked together towards dissolving the singular notion of a sexed subject.

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Sophie Taeuber and Hans Arp were dancers, too. As artists, they exemplified an intriguing possibility that bounced back and forth during the twentieth century, weaving a strong relationship of *voisinage* between the body and abstraction. As Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck put it: ‘In that period as we danced, sang and recited night after night, abstract art was tantamount to absolute honour.’

Sophie Taeuber’s work embodies this sense of neighbourhood: in 1916, in her hometown of Zurich, she enrolled in a course in artistic expressive dance with choreographer Rudolph Laban, who had arrived from Germany. There, she became friends with dancers such as Mary Wigman, who would perform at the Dadaist soirées of the Cabaret Voltaire (under the disgraceful sobriquet ‘Labanese girls’). At the opening
of the Galerie Dada in 1917, Sophie Taeuber performed with a rectangular mask which covered her face, and wore over her arms tubes of cardboard, which ended in mechanical pincers for fingers (left). These determined a limited movement, rejecting mimetic gestures. In the journal *Dada*, one reads: ‘Miss Sophie Taeuber. Delirious bizarreness in the spider of a hand vibrates rhythm rapidly ascending to the paroxism of a beautiful capricious mocking dementia.’ Her dances were driven by bodily reflex reactions, without preconceived scores, and stimulated by the noise of a gong, which motivates not only the muscles but also the nerves, not only movement but fragmentation. Hugo Ball recounts:

> It was a dance full of peaks and edges, full of a glare, of a body torn in pieces. Each gesture is broken in a hundred – sharp, bright, pointed. To the hypersensitive nervous system, the silliness of perspective, of lighting, of atmosphere opens the way to a spiritual fun, to an ironic glose; her creations are full of the grotesque and ravishing spirit of fables. Her body has a feminine intelligence and enriches the world at each new dance.7

Here the body is described with more intensity than the figure: a kind of continuous discontinuity challenges binary divisions between mental and physical, poetry and performance, machine and human. But, on the other hand, Sophie also wears a mask, so that she isn’t recognized as ‘Ms Sophie Taeuber’, the teacher at the Zurich School of Applied Arts. This tension between visibility and invisibility in the image is, therefore, also driven by her status as a woman, which constrains her public appearance.

This tension can also be recognized as a paradox, of the kind that Joan Wallach Scott has historicized under the title ‘Only Paradoxes to Offer’, in order to consider the relations between ‘the feminine’ and ‘the general’, between different feminisms and universalism, equality and difference. Each time that feminists argued for political rights in the context of liberal democracy, she argues, they have faced an impossible choice. On the one hand, they have insisted that the differences between men and women are irrelevant for citizenship. On the other hand, by the fact that they acted on behalf of women, they have insisted that the differences between men and women are irrelevant for citizenship. On the other hand, by the fact that they acted on behalf of women, they have reintroduced the very idea of difference they sought to eliminate. This paradox – the need both to accept and to refuse sexual difference in the public sphere – has been the constitutive condition of the long struggle by women to gain the right of citizenship. This paradox may equally be used in our reflections on the work of women artists.

As has repeatedly been written, the ‘body’ appears as a signifier for ‘women’ in Western discourse. Yet the shortcut taken by women artists in engaging their body – the bodies they have at hand – to make art never appears as essentialist. The shortcut of the body is used to activate and reactivate forces, to display what a body can do or where it can go, as well its alienation, its obstacles. The notion of a shortcut can also be used to handle the way women have quickly adapted to and adopted ‘new technologies’ in art making: photo, video, cyberfeminist… These are media which you learn without having to go through the traditional master–apprentice relation, and many women have been passing on their knowledge to others. The current wave of ‘re-enactments’ of so-called historical performances of the 1970s can also be understood in terms of embodiment, interweaving representation and materiality. And there is again a shortcut to be acknowledged here between activist use and aesthetic use, even if today all these means are absorbed into exhibition, museum or gallery spectacles.

Although she only performed as a dancer for a few years, Sophie Taeuber imbued all of her work with dance: not only in the realization of L’Aubette, the restaurant, cinema, bar, tearoom, nightclub leisure complex in Strasbourg (see over), but also in her *Line drawings* (1940–43), which are like performative trajectories. Like the *Dance Diagrams* (1962) by Andy
Warhol, they are driven from the floor to the wall, still branding the work as horizontal choreographies that make concrete – or act as quotations of – the bodily gestures.

The irruption of gendered bodies by women artists who stepped into the world as art-activists has moved away from the social norms regarding sex. For since the ‘female sex’ does not imply a reciprocal ‘male sex’, and as sex can be understood as a political and cultural interpretation of the body, women become ontologically suffused with sex: they are their sex, and reciprocally, sex is necessarily feminine. So the use of the body by women artists reclaiming their own images raises issues in sexual politics that go way beyond images.

**Smashing the glass bubble**

In New York at the beginning of the 1960s, Louise Bourgeois short-circuited this concern by smashing ‘the glass bubble that encapsulated sculpture in a world of illusion, representation, idealization’ and also in the general language of art. In her work of the time, the encounter implied going face to face with the reality of the body, without metaphor – body as egg, body as cylinder. Breasts, anuses, mouths, penises, faeces appear as ‘desiring machines’ shaking the economy of visual representation.

Not very far away in place and time – New York, the 1960s – at the Judson Dance Theater, in a medium traditionally disdained as minor art, artists of all types used the body as a medium to affirm new intellectual possibilities, smashing the hegemony of mind over flesh. As Yvonne Rainer, one of the Theater’s main protagonists, put it: *The Mind is a Muscle.*

Before joining the workshops of the Judson Dance Theater, Carolee Schneemann had been close to the scene surrounding Happenings and Assemblage in New York. *Eye Body* (1963), one of her first actions (though only for the purpose of producing photographs), features her actual body combined in the work as ‘integral material’. In the repertory of notes and pictures in which this was theorized in 1979, in More Than Meat Joy, one can read how in 1962–63, she foresaw the development of her artwork into performance situations, which already struck her as ‘too much’. This excess is not only in the situation but also in its duration and space, transferred to the audience, from the optical to the physical, from passivity to activity:

In this way the audience is actually visually more passive than when confronting a work which requires projective vision. … During a theatre piece the audience may become more active physically than when viewing a painting or assemblage; their physical reactions will tend to manifest actual scale – relating to motions, mobilities the body does make in a specific environment. They enlarge their kinaesthetic field of participation; their attention is required by a varied span of actions, some of which may threaten to encroach on the integrity of their position in space. Before they can ‘reason’, they may find their bodies performing on the basis of immediate visual circumstances.

Schneemann is looking here for something that has the capacity to undo the boundaries of the self in the face of an overwhelming sense of pleasure, indicating the presence of an experience that exceeds the limits of an individual’s discursive position.

In its beginnings, as narrated by dance theorist Sally Banes, the strongest concern at the Judson Dance Theater was the notion of ‘letting go’, as in Yvonne Rainer and Charles Ross’s *Room Service*, an open-ended game of ‘follow the leader’; or in Carolee Schneemann’s *Lateral Splay*, in which the dancers ran as hard and as fast they could until they collided with some obstacle, an ‘explosive and linear refrain, a propulsive jet of movement cutting through the sequences of other works and materials of the environment’. Special exercises were designed, such as performing blindfolded, keeping in constant contact by crawling ‘over each other’s arms, legs, bellies, back, in order to arrange a kind of organless, collective, body’, as Lygia Clark too would propose...
in her experimental environments. But the other side of breaking with technique was the suppression of energy, and relaxation of the body, negating the physical tension of usual ballet dancing.

Reworking sexual imagery was at the core of Schneemann’s *Meat Joy*, combining semi-nudity (wearing underwear), bodies and matter, various textures and flesh. This event was first staged in Paris in 1964 at the Festival de la Libre Expression, at the invitation of the artist Jean-Jacques Lebel (before going to Dennison Hall in London and then to the Judson Church in New York). To Nouveau Réalisme’s use of the walls, the signs and the debris of the city as aesthetic substance, Schneemann added her own particular incorporation of self-produced, sexualized and erotic imagery. This celebration of flesh as material required raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, transparent plastic, rope, brushes and paper scrap as physical equivalences. Performed as a ‘psychic and imagistic stream in which the layered elements mesh and gain intensity by the energy complement of the audience’, it included certain constant parameters – sequence, light, sound, materials – but other components varied, such as attitude, gesture, duration, and the relationships between performers, including ‘several women whose gestures develop from tactile, bodily relationships to individual men and a mass of meat slices’.

Schneemann breaks out of the categorization by which her gender is reduced to an image. In directing every aspect of production – performing troupe and technicians, as well as lights, sound, props, electronic systems, costumes – and then physically moving in what she has created, Schneemann shifts from image-maker to creating her own self-images. Therein, perhaps, lies the ‘obscenity’ of which she has been accused. Acknowledging that Schneemann’s performances and films are ‘self-shot, without an external controlling eye’, what is found most obscene in her work is the lack of an external gaze.

This is even more controversial when the artist’s body figures prominently as an erotic subject. Presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 1967, Schneemann’s *Fuses*, a 22-minute film about sexual intimacy, explores sexuality from her perspective as both subject and film-maker. Combining photographic footage of sex between herself and her partner, with layers of paper, collages, painting and tinting applied directly to the celluloid frame, Schneemann provides a cinematic eroticism, challenging dominant representations of sex in cinema and proposing an alternative to patriarchal representations of sexuality. In her insistence that she is and can be both image and image maker, Schneemann is a forerunner both of performance art and new media installations, as well as of much contemporary feminist art as well.

In 1967, invited as a body that ‘speaks louder than the word’ to the Roundhouse in London, for the ‘Congress of the Dialectics of Liberation’, organized by the Institute of Phenomenological Studies, with the participation of Gregory Bateson, David Cooper, Ronald Laing, Erving Goffmann, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, Schneemann encountered the hostility of the group, leading to the rejection and sabotage of her work. She would later identify the prejudice underlying this ostracism as resentment over the participation of a woman as ‘a sort of unclassifiable physical extension’ which unleashed a profound somatophobia in philosophy’s phallic economy. After all, what are these actions, performances and films, if not the reshaping of sculptural representation?

In the work of Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Ann Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk, Atsuko Tanaka, Yaiho Kusama, Esther Ferrer, Jackie Raynal, Gina Pane, Valie Export or Lygia Clark (to refer only the works of the late 1960s) the body ‘captures the image’. It will not appear again as a ‘passive’ medium – as inert matter, as Christian precedents have it – nor as mere ‘facticity’, anticipating some meaning, as if the body were alienated or indifferent to signification, and signification was disembodied consciousness. These women artists opened a field of visibilities that would
be claimed by feminism, in its ‘second’ wave, as it expanded into the 1970s.  

**Incorporating gender**

In the late 1980s, when the photographic self-portraits of Claude Cahun began to re-emerge, and as they started to circulate in the early 1990s, the time was perfect for them to engage in renewed discussions of sex and gender. It is as if they came into existence as ‘readymades’ for discussion. Producing multiple images of gender that seemed outside both feminine and masculine norms, these self-portraits seemed to embody Joan Rivière’s ‘Masquerade of Femininity’ (1929).

Cahun’s self-images have circulated under the rubric of ‘queer’ theatricality, with a strong appeal to emerging theories of gender performance. Many noticed coincidences between the photographic works and theoretical writings of the 1980s, so that it now takes more of an effort to reconsider Claude Cahun in her own space and time than it does to reconsider her work in a postmodern context. It is only after this initial reception that new readings of these self-portraits (which appeared publicly around thirty-five years after Cahun’s death) began to re-envision a specific time and space for them. Paris between the wars appeared then as the site for a construction of a visual culture in which a network of women were able to emancipate themselves from the constraints of gender, and recognize themselves as part of a lesbian culture.

In Wittig’s terms, a lesbian is not a woman. If ‘woman’ only exists as a term that stabilizes a binary opposition to ‘man’, and that relation is heterosexual, then refusing to appear as a woman is choosing to appear as lesbian.

So what is left, when the body, which had been ‘rendered coherent through the category of sex, is disaggregated, rendered chaotic’? Cahun’s self-portraits do not just go against an inner truth of gender, they also scatter the very notion of self. A ‘massacre’ of the self is the object of both writing and image-making in the book *Aveux non Avenus (Avowals Unavowed)* produced in 1930 by Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore – the names being ‘drag’ identities for two women, lovers, partners, companions and co-authors. Cahun’s text is intertwined with ten inserts by Marcel Moore, as cut-outs, disassembled and reassembled fragments and quotations from the self-portraits. Each of these montages revolves around vision but mostly plays on the ‘I’, the subject, and its relation to the ‘eye’, the eye and the lens which regard this ‘I’. The coded language for the couple thus plays with the formation or deformation of a body in process, a ‘becoming lesbian’ as a collective body. The ‘I’ of autobiography has been doubled and replayed by a twofold, collaborative ‘You’. It is not only by chance that the collaborative formation in the production of Cahun’s self-portraiture was foregrounded in the late 1990s, precisely at the time when the experts of the ‘Symbolic Order’ made their case for sexual difference. In the case of Cahun and Moore, it was not the old story of an artist using assistants, but a lifelong game between two companions, so that Claude Cahun’s name is now put together with that of Marcel Moore, as a twofold artist. The success of today’s cooperative or socially engaged artistic identities should thus be considered in the context of resistance and counteraction to the transcendent difference between the sexes (*difference des sexes*).

**Display of gender/gender as display**

As an activist, in 1992 Zoe Leonard made a poster of a woman’s vagina which read: ‘Read my lips before they are sealed’. At Documenta 9, the same year, Leonard chose to exhibit, without the traditional devices (framing, matting, protective glass, etc.), black-and-white photos of female genitalia. Each picture was a kind of cut-out in the style of traditional museography, with its wallpaper decor and its framed pictures representing ‘women’, or rather
an essentialized woman, painted more or less in the nude. By proposing a close-up shot of particular female genitalia, Zoe Leonard introduced a particular point of view into the universal language of the museum, by foregrounding its sexual politics and its politics of domination. In her earlier photographs taken in museums or galleries, Zoe Leonard had already shown the display of gender assignation, in dolls, in wigs, in fashion shows, in anatomical figures, as a norm that can't be fully internalized. In the Natural History Museum, the ‘transition to upright walking’ diagram charts the ‘evolution of man’; but the subject is, as well, two little girls looking, trying to find their place in the patriarchal culture, which includes science as well as museography. One girl is absorbed in what she observes, the other is more sensitive to the presence of the photographer, recording the scene. For Leonard ‘the conflict between the act of observation and the one of performance appears often in my work.’

Who is looking? What are they looking at? What are we looking at, whose agency are we looking at? These questions about the order of seeing and its subversion are part of Leonard’s case studies.

What exhibition of gender allows certain people to be identified as human, so that they have rights, to be cared for when they are sick, or to mourn when they are dead? In Leonard’s photographs or installations, there are numerous examples of gender presentation, displaying the various ways in which a body performs its cultural significance: whether a bearded woman as chopped head specimen in a glass bell, photographed from five different angles; whether a female anatomical model engaged in a defensive gesture as an indication of chastity; whether a mustachioed doll in its transparent package. The unbearable violence of the apparatuses disciplining the body (Beauty Calibrator, Gynecology Instruments, Chastity Belt) sits alongside the triumphant flesh of the performer Jennifer Miller, photographed twelve times as a non-conformist bearded ‘Pin-Up Calendar’. This way of including uncategorized genders, as well as showing the invisible violence inflicted by gender-based norms, has stretched to other forms of racial and sexual constructions (e.g. creating a fictional character through the archival function of photography, such as in Fae Richards Photo Archive), all of which encounter discrimination and erasure. Positing the body, not as an outside to representation, but as a site for rendering visible normative statements founded on the refusal of alternative possibilities, provides new perspectives on old questions about images.

Notes


4. Ibid.
9. This was the title of a choreographed, multipart performance for seven dancers, interspersed with film and text, built upon a backbone of variations on Yvonne Rainer’s former dance solo, Trio A.
11. Ibid., p. 10.
12. Ibid., p. 49.
13. Ibid., p. 62.
16. Ibid.

Images

Marie Vassilieff, Rhodoid Vowel Dress for the theatre company Art et Action at the Exposition Universelle des Arts et Techniques de Paris, 1937. © D.R.
Zoe Leonard, Untitled, 1992, Installation in the Neue Galerie, Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany. Photo Markus Töllhoff, Kassel.