

It's Time for Action!

Heike Munder

Insouciant Monster Women

It's Time for Action (There's No Option) was the title Yoko Ono gave a pop song she recorded in 2000, in which she called everyone to action: *Every day – any way*. The song reflects her life's motto: not to remain in the present or the past, but to look forward. Ono became famous as an artist, musician, and then as the wife of John Lennon, and in all roles she flouted socially constructed role models of the 1960s and 1970s. She has never spoken explicitly about the role of women or equal opportunities, but instead lives out her notion of feminine identity with every breath of her body. She has approached the theme directly in many of her works. Her most famous work, *Cut Piece* (1965), was a performance in which visitors, bit by bit, cut pieces of her clothing away with a pair of scissors, right down to the bra. It was a voyeuristic act—afflicted by the gaze on her body and her facial expression—which focused in an exemplary manner on the object-emphasized nature of woman, proceeding to the very limits of pain. Her 1969 film *Rape* is a similar work, shot in collaboration with John Lennon. Here, the camera follows a young woman who at first flirts with the camera, but shortly after becomes irritated and maddened, and finally crumbles into hysterical panic, reduced to a threatened animal in the corner. In her private as well as her public life, Ono does not care one jot for the conventions and expectations that surround her being a woman, married or otherwise. She intervenes in all kinds of situations, whether political or artistic. She is a solo warrior of the view that speaking in public about her position as a woman implies admitting woman's inferiority in the system. To ignore it and simply take her rights for granted makes far greater sense to her. But even today transgressions of existing codes of social behaviour are punished by isolation and sometimes ostracism, in her case evidenced most famously by the fact that she has been demonized by so many for the breakup of the Beatles.

A younger generation of female musicians have marvelled at Ono, admiring her behaviour and her hoarse screams in her early improvised music pieces, and regarding her as one of their most inspiring role models. This generation draws on the energy of punk rock music and the idea of the body as an object with which to attract attention. As Pil & Galia Kollektiv, friends and collaborators of Chicks on Speed, commented in their booklet for the *Girl Monster*-CD (2006): "The girl monster is hysterical, neurotic, satanic and hers is the kind of hysteria that cannot be maintained and suppressed with consumerism or idol-worship."¹ This self-description works with the negative attributes of classical female psychology—hysterical, neurotic, satanic—and uses the terms as a surprise attack. They hope both to slip away from authoritarian analysis by turning it around and thus demanding from the audience and listeners ambivalent ways of reading, and above all to attract great attention to their shows and gestures. Through the reference to the monstrous (*Girl Monster*), the Pil & Galia Kollektiv channel and enthrall the gaze of the public, at the same time drawing on Donna Haraway's famous treatise *Cyborg Manifesto* as an attempt to circumvent the attribution of the binary comparison with the masculine.² These girls know the power of the gaze their transgressions can trigger during their shows. They link the fun had in that provocation to the admission that in our society some things change only slowly, yet do so continuously. The dynamic in the group lightens the process for them. As early as the beginning of the 1990s, young



Portraits Behind the Desk –
 Performative Portraits, 2005/06
 Courtesy of the artist
 Photography by Johanna Rylander/
 Malmö Konstmuseum

women from all countries involved in the punk and hardcore scene organized the Riot-Grrrl movement in a grassroots style, as a reaction against the lack of representation of female musicians, and to give a platform to their rage about such circumstances. Among them were groups like Bikini Kill, Sleater Kinney, and Le Tigre. Le Tigre, Chicks on Speed, and Peaches take great care to attempt a correcting of music history by performing cover songs, by sometimes almost forgotten female protagonists, in an effort to bring them back to the public consciousness and reintroduce continuity.³

In the visual arts the strategies of continuity are similar, and in this case it is frequently not just the quote, but also the (female) originator who surfaces and is discussed and forms an intertwining of generations. This is one of the approaches used in *It's Time for Action*. It encompasses female artists of the first, second, and third waves of feminism. Various atmospheres, generations, and themes are consolidated: generating a head of steam through the voyeurism the works trigger—always on the trail of the enforced ego, the Girl Monster in us, born of the self-conception of each of their generations, a lust for life, the use of art as symbolic representation, and the conviction that in an active movement everything can be possible.

Role Models

One concern of mine is re-examining the theme of feminism, which appeared to have been discussed enough at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, and for a brief period drew increased attention to it. We are talking about feminism. In the late 1990s when the active period of girlism had come to its end, femi-

nism was more than just old hat; it no longer appeared attractive to a younger generation of women, or it served only as an identification model. Aside from which many believed they could rest upon the successes of the first and second generation. From a superficial point of view, the situation of women in the middle of this decade could be said to be in really good shape, with women occupying key political positions, and women in the artistic field surfacing increasingly frequently in art's rankings. But precisely at this point, when as bosses or leading figures women should have a role-model function, looking more closely one realizes that those very female success stories distinctly lack female role models of their own. And all that in the face of the many role models that cultural history has to offer: Gertrude Stein, VALIE EXPORT, Aretha Franklin, Kara Walker, Yayoi Kusama, Agatha Christie, Cleopatra, Marie Curie, Bette Davis, Patty Smith, Debby Harry, Kim Gordon, Indira Gandhi, Greta Garbo, Mae West, Rosalind Krauss, Judith Butler, Andrea Fraser, Anaïs Nin, Yoko Ono, Alice Neel, Joan of Arc, Marlene Dietrich, Eleanor Roosevelt, Susan Sontag, Virginia Woolf, Peggy Guggenheim, Frida Kahlo, Martina Navratilova, Kate Moss, Björk, Martha Rosler, Pipilotti Rist, Christa Wolf, Amelia Jones, Catherine David, Missy Elliot, Grace Jones, Annie Lenox, Courtney Love, etc. The list goes on and on. But we marvel at these women far more for their aura and their cultural achievements than for their actual lives as examples to be followed.

A method of covering one's back—quite literally—is to have a choice of suitable role models that can be referred to in the form of a photograph on the wall behind one's desk. This was the idea of American artist Mary Beth Edelson (born 1933), when she became aware of the fact that the media presentation of women in professional fields usually took place without the support of such a role model image. On the other hand, in the male workplace, a portrait of a famous man was usually to be found mounted proudly on the wall behind the boss's desk—with the effect that the power of the role model is incorporated into his identity, often augmenting or even doubling the sense of his own individual authority. Female portraits are rarely to be found, and if they are they are family portraits that demonstrate class and prestige. Unless one counts the pin-up illustrations adorning many workplaces during World War II, illustrations of women as figures of authority in public life are more the exception than the rule. As a result of this observation, in 2005 Mary Beth Edelson asked women to name one hundred female role models that could be hung representatively behind the work desk. Here are a few examples of their choices to give an impression: Marina Abramović, Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (Amma), Hannah Arendt, Emily Brontë, Maria Callas, Colette, Angela Davis, Pat Hearn, Rosa Luxemburg, Iris Murdoch, J. K. Rowling, Alice Schwarzer, Katharina Sieverding, and Valerie Solanas. Edelson portrayed the named models by following a dogma of her own, through which she attached and undermined the classical rules of painting.⁴ The completed portraits were exhibited under the title *Portraits Behind the Desk Series* (2005/6) as an ancestral gallery in the Malmö Konstmuseum. On the opening night, guests were photographed with a role model behind a mighty desk, and a print was sent to each of those who had been portrayed.

To gain attention for women and to secure them a place in history was also a concern of artist Mathilde ter Heijne (*1969), when she researched her work *Women to Go* (2006). She looked for biographies of women who, in spite of immeasurable contributions to history, have not found an adequate place within it. As a result, her work deals with constructed role models. The title can be understood quite literally: the visitor had a choice of over 300 different postcard motifs displayed on postcard stands, and could take them home. The front side of the post-

card showed portrait photographs of anonymous women who had lived or had been born between 1800 and 1900. On the reverse side, short biographies were provided, of women whose lives during those times can be described as extraordinary, but hardly any of whose biographies are widely known. Image and biography do not concur, yet the postcards still generate identification and admiration. The cards were collected with great enthusiasm by the visitors.

Sexual Self-Empowerment

The liberalization of sexuality and the liberation from social rules were the foundational pillars for many women as well as men in the 1970s. They wanted to live out their desire, and no longer permit their desires to be taboos or simply concealed, as they had been in the extremely prudish post-War period. In Switzerland, the artist Manon played a significant role. She displayed her most intimate desires to the public, and the moralistic discourse of the period castigated her as a "fallen angel". Her most important work and first art action was the *Das lachsfarbene Boudoir*, created in 1974. The boudoir is a replica of Manon's bedroom (from the original period), a site full of fetishes with an erotically charged atmosphere. The work was a provocation much intensified by dubbing the room a "boudoir": in historical terms the boudoir is an embodiment of female architecture, and as a private retreat serves as a pendant to the gentleman's chamber. The boudoir, which by the beginning of the 20th century gradually disappeared, is a room in which the feminine is embodied and idealized, disclosing a panopticon of feminine topography. Manon's cabinet-like, luxuriously lined, and erotically charged room was full of distressed salmon pink silk satin, champagne bottles, dirty washing, horns, seashells, mirrors, lipstick, as well as personal letters and photographs of her companions of that time such as Urs Lüthi or Jürgen Klauke. Sensual delights were placed provocatively in the foreground.

Sometimes, strategies are difficult to reconstruct in retrospect, for certain realizations and accomplishments are nowadays taken for granted, which in that period were yet to be fully asserted and required a definitive carrying through. One such example is the active work in the (soft) porn industry of the 1980s, such as that carried out by Cosey Fanni Tutti and others. Cosey Fanni Tutti's work was an attempt to devise her own sexuality actively, not only privately, but also to live it out precisely where the purest masculine voyeurism is encountered, and furthermore to maintain it. A precursor of this was the American artist and "whore" Annie Sprinkle (*1954), renowned for her performance *Public Cervix Announcement* (1990-1995), in which the public were invited to observe her cervix with a speculum and electric torch in order to "demystify the feminine body."⁵ Her infectious good humour made it possible for Sprinkle to turn society's greatest sexual taboo on its head, an achievement for which she is revered by many. Moreover she was extremely politically active, campaigning for the rights of sex workers and their medical care. Sprinkle was one of the major protagonists of the "sex positive" movement of 1980s feminism.

Cosey Fanni Tutti (*1951), who is known more as a musician than an artist, counts amongst the idols of recent music history. Her work in the industrial noise band *Throbbing Gristle* (TG) and her performance group *Coum* in the 1970s has led to her being named by the *Girl Monsters* as a representative of the monstrously feminine. Cosey Fanni Tutti shocked the art scene in England with the appearances of her performance group *Coum*, in which openly acted out sexuality, which sometimes went as far as anal intercourse, was a regular occurrence on stage. The actions were spontaneous, but provocations were very well designed, reaching their climax in the legendary and scandal-inciting exhibition at the London ICA in 1976.

Here Cosey Fanni Tutti presented a show that interwove her various occupations as photo model for men's adult magazines and professional striptease artist with art and music. The artist harvested a great deal of rejection—most significantly for her unbowed reinterpretation of her pornographic activities into art, but also from the many feminists who were prejudiced against the sex industry per se.

Body Shells

Here, we return to role models and remain concerned with the illustration of the body. It is significant that works in the feminist field continually return to the illustration of the body, in spite of all the attempts to negate it that took place in the riotous 1970s and 1980s. For the body is, as the British social anthropologist Mary Douglas described, the venue and symbol of society. Through bodily behaviour and the acting out of rituals, rules and limits, social rules and hierarchies within society are clarified.⁶

Furthermore, the banishing of the body was also a banishing of individual sexuality, and desire emanating from the love of life. At the end of the 1980s the provocative author Camilla Paglia, despised by many feminists, shocked readers with her biological comparisons and uninhibited marvelling at male flesh, a desire she supported with de Sade. According to Paglia: "Feminism has, due to its actual task of striving for political equality, exceeded it and has got off course in the denial of the contingency of life."⁷ She brought her opponents to incandescent rage with her sentence, "Leaving sex to the feminists is like letting your dog vacation at the taxidermist."⁸ Quoting Paglia provided a satirical barb against the dogmatism of some feminists; in the 1990s their strict codex was broken by a young light-hearted generation.

It was the age of girlism, a loose network of young women, who entered the arena charged with humour and spawned a line of unheeding women—for example Pipilotti Rist, Chicks on Speed, or Patty Chang. They defied the victim role of the constructed view and won their audiences over with an infectious delight in the world. The strategy—also a subversive act—was successful, and an entire generation followed along.

One of their major protagonists is Pipilotti Rist, who has established herself with video works such as *Pickelporno* (1992) or *Ever is over all* (1997). Here the female beholder is inspired by watching a young woman in a swaying dress nonchalantly smashing the windows of parked cars with a metal pipe, an act usually carried out at night by riotous gangs of male youths, and certainly not by a single woman in the broad light of day. It is obvious that this generation of women, the girlists, have taken an important step toward liberation and self-empowerment, with a resounding assertiveness that has never existed before. Pipilotti Rist displays this dilemma precisely in one of her older video works, *(Entlastungen) Pipilottis Fehler ((Absolutions) Pipilotti's Mistakes)* (1988). Here, Rist treats the eternal struggle for an unreachable inner and outer perfection, and the attempt to escape this torturous non-attaining and the guilt feeling resulting from one's own inadequacy—inflicted through the societal power structures of the normative, the legislative body, and its enforcement. Three scenarios present this attempt at flight and the hopelessness of its striving. Thus the female figure attempts, in vain, to overcome obstacles—for instance something fence-like—or in a swimming pool tries to fight against her hand being forced under the water and escape the situation by passing out, a reaction that links her to the psychoanalytically bound conception of hysteria as the physical transformation of an unsatisfied female psyche. In Rist's work the acceptance of this struggle as well as her own defect/mistake are earmarked as possible solutions.

A further option is the exaggerated attribution of vulnerability and active exhibition of the body exemplified by female artists such as VALIE EXPORT with her *Tapp- und Tast-Kino* (1968) or Hannah Wilke in her *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1975) of the 1970s. Accordingly, the artist Patty Chang (*1972) was aware that the body, in spite of all the theoretical attempts of the 1980s and early 1990s to deny it, is inescapable—too many questions vital for survival are acted out upon it. Chang became renowned for her solo performances, in which the psychological inner and the physical exterior of the body take centre stage. The spectator oscillates between nausea and voyeurism. In her 1998 video work *Melons (At a Loss)*, Chang, dressed in a tight bodice, looks straight ahead into the camera and tells of her aunt who has died of breast cancer. Using a knife she cuts through the cup of a bra. Instead of a mutilated breast, a half melon becomes visible as a metaphor. Chang takes it out with a great deal of noise and proceeds, with a spoon, to rake out the flesh and eat it, continuing to speak with great exertion. The treatment itself is grotesque and is a direct reference to the black humour of the *Girl Monster* musicians.

Self-Conception

The world is certainly still shaped by heterosexual constructions of male norms, which can only be ignored or broken with great difficulty. In his book *Male Domination*, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote that the power maintenance of the patriarchy belongs to the “paradoxical submission” of women.⁹ This presupposes woman’s anticipatory submissiveness and implicit knowledge of structures of order. As a result of this a taken-for-granted grand entrance of women in public life is broadly absent, and is evidently not always valued positively—as already seen in case of Yoko Ono and many others.

In fiction, on the other hand, such an entrance has long since taken place. In her book *Pin-up Grrrls* (2006), Maria Buszek dedicated her work amongst others to the pin-up illustrator Alberto Vargas, who is regarded as having gallantly succeeded in combining self-assuredness with sex appeal. His perfect combination of feminine and masculine ideals was admired by men and women, both hetero and homosexual, and copied in equal measure by both. Originally, the Vargas girl rose to fame in the American magazine *Esquire* during the 1930s and 1940s, among other things keeping American soldiers’ spirits up during World War II. But the Vargas girl was not esteemed only by men, for she possessed enviable qualities: she was not passive, but highly self-aware, extremely self-secure, and enormously sexy. Unfortunately, after World War II women again experienced a setback, and the newly gained self-image was only sustained for a brief period. However, the Vargas girl was to keep her female admirers over the following decades. It survived also those of Laura Mulvey as masculine-coded “gaze” and essentialist spurned interpretations. Female artists like Annie Sprinkle or Manon, and also Mary Beth Edelson or Patty Chang, take these images on. Sprinkle uses them in order to expose her physical qualities in *Anatomy of a Pin-up* (1984–2006), and Mary Beth Edelson to demonstrate her admiration for film divas of history and to create portraits from them of what they would have really liked to have been, but could not be.

Like Ono, artist Katharina Sieverding (*1944) perfectly controls the self-confident entrance in her life and in her work. She is renowned for her large-scale photography, as well as for works rooted in the fields of body art, performance, and experimental film. As early as the 1970s, Sieverding used photography as a major medium and took it on accordingly—contrary to the view of many artists of the period for whom it was only a means of documenting their actions and performances. Usually a self-reflexive gaze at her own physiognomy forms the centre

point. Sieverding's works are situated at the cutting edge between society and the individual, and react shrewdly to dominant societal conditions. Implementing provocative images such as *Deutschland wird deutscher* (*German will become more German*), in which she responded to the extreme right-wing reaction after the fall of the Iron Curtain, she has generated public and political scandal. The work *Transformer* (1973) shows a likeness of the artist in double exposure, which she overlaid with that of her partner, Klaus Mettig, creating a fictive androgynous face which, by means of various forms of lighting, different poses, and contrasts, changes continually. With every minimal change she exhibits a new expression. The face appears akin to a sphinx-like spectral mask or androgynous indefinite held in an unswerving transformation of changing identities. Sieverding is aware that art is not a real holding place for politics; nevertheless it is an important symbolic representative that she uses for her messages.

Stagings are of great importance and provide the opportunity to reveal and recognize contradictions and ambivalences. The images that are created can likewise be hedonistically consumed, like utopian stimuli, and increase the potential for exercising influence on the current stagings of gender. This can culminate in stage entrances of infectious energy.¹⁰ In Anat Ben David's performances, the Israeli artist is aware of precisely this potential when she covers and censors the intimate areas of her body with gaffer tape, takes the stage, and begins the show in a white dandy suit. Her pieces are fed by punk elements, combined with Dada poses and graphics, which she introduces with her videos. Together with *Chicks on Speed* they bear a message to the world, which appeals for self-confident role models, and their fragmentation is formulated as the message:

We are many
 We are prepared
 We are linked
 We have a program
 We have methods
 We are female pressure
 We share political thinking
 We are avant-garde
 We are a social mobile
 We are critics
 We are shoe maniacs
 We have a message
 (Chicks on Speed)

Differing strategies lead on; the world needs more Girl Monsters!

Translation from German by James Rumball.

A version of this essay was first published in Heike Munder, ed., *It's Time for Action (There's No Option)*. *About Feminism*, JRP|Ringier, Zurich, 2007, pp. 167-189.

Notes

1 Pil and Galia Kollektiv, "Girl Monster vs. Fembot", liner notes for *Chicks on Speed* present *Girl Monster* (a compilation featuring 60 women from punk and modern music on Chicks on Speed Records), Berlin: Chicks on Speed Records, 2006.

2 See Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York, 1991, pp. 149-181.

3 See Christiane Erhardter and Elke Zobl, "Mehr als die Summe der einzelnen Teile. Über Feministische Fanzines, Musiknetzwerke und Ladyfeste", in *Female Consequences. Feminismus, Antirassismus, Popmusik*, ed. Rosa Reitsamer and Rupert Weinzierl, Löcker, Vienna, 2006, pp. 17-30.

4 See <http://www.dogme95.dk/the-vow-of-chastity/>. Accessed March 2016.

5 See <http://www.anniesprinkle.org/html/writings/pca.html>. Accessed March 2016.

6 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, London/Boston, 1966. Quoted from Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics", in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, Routledge, London/New York, 2003, pp. 414-426.

7 Camille Paglia, *Sexualität und Gewalt oder: Natur und Kunst*, DTV Deutscher Taschenbuch, Munich, 1996, p. 9 (trans. by James Rumball).

8 Ibid. (trans. by James Rumball).

9 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. by Richard Nice, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2001.

10 See Stephanie Kiessling and Nina Stastny, "Let's get physical. Körperinszenierungen zwischen Pop & Rock", in *Female Consequences. Feminismus, Antirassismus, Popmusik*, Rosa Reitsamer and Rupert Weinzierl, eds., Löcker, Vienna, 2006, p. 41f.

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