



De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

There is a definite thrill that comes from walking into an exhibition, in whatever state of partial or total disarray you happen to be in, letting it unfold in front of you, and realizing with relief that you are being treated with sensitivity and generosity and being encouraged into a discussion, rather than being curatorially or institutionally led by the nose. It is even more gratifying when it is a group exhibition whose subject is as potentially vexed and still crucially important as Feminism - in all its different guises and glories. Don't you think it's a great title, life motto and perhaps under-riding ethos: 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution?' I repeated it to a lot of different people and it always produced a smile, even before they knew that it was coined by Lithuanian anarchist, Emma Goldman. Dance is the antithesis of a marching army. And, of course, it implies joy, which Feminist art is often unfairly accused of lacking.

Prior to this show I didn't know about De Appel's unique institutional beginnings as a project space, established in 1975 by the female gallerist Wies Smals, specifically for international performance art. 'If I Can't Dance...' drew extensively on the institution's archives, giving it a satisfying depth of field. And as one of the participating artists pointed out, this clever move allowed the contemporary offerings plenty of freedom from the burden of historicization. The archive material - including documents,

catalogues and video-taped performances - was displayed atop a white cube, dubbed the 'Shadow Cabinet', in a well-thought-out installation by Stefanie Seibold that also included her text wall covering *Reader/Wallpaper* (2006). It made the archive an integral part of the exhibition, rather than an impossible-to-access informational add-on. The material on offer included works by Carolee Schneeman, Moniek Toebosch, Martha Wilson, Gina Pane and Joan Jonas. Valie Export's *Raum sehen und Raum hören* (Space Seeing and Space Hearing, 1973-4) stood out for its hyper-drollness. This short black and white video shows the artist standing expressionless, hands by her sides, in an empty space. Jump-cut edits and changing camera angles suggest the artist is being teleported - an effect heightened by an electronic soundtrack of synthesizer oscillations.

'I Can't Dance...' was actually the second part of a two-year project encompassing a huge spread of performances, discussions and screenings amongst other events. Not that the exhibition alone wasn't enough, especially because of great works such as Frances Stark's *Structures that fit my opening and other parts considered in relation to their whole* (2006). If you never see another PowerPoint presentation in your life, you should make an exception for this one: Stark has a way with words and her wry, self-deprecating, journal-like musings on being a lover, mother and artist made me squirm with their honesty. Domestic concerns also played a role in Haegue Yang's installation *Afterimage* (2006), which abstractly

Stefanie Seibold
Reader/Wallpaper
2006
Mixed media
Installation view

summoned the memory of the environs of an abandoned family house, and her photography series *Gymnastics of the Foldables* (2006), depicting a white wire clothes rack in all of its potential rigid, but amusing, shapes.

One of Feminism's active legacies is the idea that art history needs to be constantly rewritten and redirected. As part of her ensemble of paintings and drawings affixed to free-standing panels, *Attestation (What was it before it exploded?)* (2006), Jutta Koether made iconoclastic reinterpretations of Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866) and Paul Cézanne's *La Femme (The Eternal Feminine)* (c. 1876-8). Her deskilled 'wrong' style, her penchant for scratchy texts and her matte-black, post-Punk style suggested that, for Koether, traditional skills are still the master's game - a game she won't play along with.

Possibly underpinning the inclusion of Karl Holmqvist's installation *Scumbags & Cie* (2006), was the notion that Queer theory arguably helped jettison some strands of Feminism from essentialist encampments. Holmqvist revisited the oeuvre of the influential Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama by creating his own version of a couple of her works including a shopping bag with lurid bulbous protrusions (*Black Kusama Refugee Bag*, 2006). Hung alongside was his *Joke Painting* (2006) à la Richard Prince - a text on a black background which read, 'My son could have done that/Well he didn't'.

'If I can't dance...' avoided overplaying the visceral and ranting aspects commonly (if somewhat unfairly) associated with feminist art, in favour of critical reflection and generating a web of relationships between the viewer and the artwork. While such an approach might have surprised or disappointed those who would have preferred to see more aggressive feminist stances (or more body parts), it was precisely this that prevented the show from being predictable, too easily pigeonholed or dogmatic.

Dominic Eichler



Frances Stark
Structures that fit my opening and other parts considered in relation to their whole
2006
Still from PowerPoint presentation

If I Can't Dance ... Part II

At a feminist symposium in Utrecht last spring a member of the audience asked: 'Why is Feminism suddenly so hip right now?' The question is, of course, faintly ludicrous, but it was a serious – and a disgruntled – one, suggesting as it did that 'Feminism' was just another faddish topic of discussion (placed somewhere between 'the political' and 'on beauty' perhaps). Yet surely 'Feminism', in all its forms – from a critical approach informing a range of academic discourses to advocacy for women's rights – is ever-present. Looking at the plethora of feminist-related arts activity coming up in 2007 – conferences, symposia and exhibitions ranging from the academic to the more free-form and experimental – the question is understandable. It is now around 50 years since the burgeoning of the second phase of the international women's movement; perhaps this current interest has to do with enough time passing to make possible an atmosphere of celebration, combined with the fuzzy, bohemian nostalgia that pervades the art world, as much as it has to do with the daughters and sons of the movement coming of age – especially the daughters, particularly in the West. These are women who have experienced a feminist-informed system of education and now reached positions of power: women who are able not just to look back, make connections and reappraise but also to green-light the exhibitions and projects that explore these very themes.

The aforementioned symposium in Utrecht was one stage in the ongoing research platform/conference/exhibition/publication entitled 'If I Can't Dance I

Don't Want To Be Part of Your Revolution ... Feminist Legacies and Potentials in Contemporary Art Practice', curated by Frédérique Bergholtz and Annie Fletcher. The project has now been running for a year or so, and has been manifested in different forms and locations across the Netherlands. The 'edition' I witnessed included presentations, or rather 'performative papers', by art historians and critics Jan Verwoert and Dorothea von Hantelmann, artists The Otolith Group, Karl Holmqvist and Frances Stark, a round-table discussion chaired by Fletcher, a screening of Vera Chytilová's film *Sedmikrásky* (Daisies, 1966) and a programme of films by Yvonne Rainer. Circling around ideas of agency, change and difference, previous and subsequent editions have included explorations of global feminisms and performativity through connections between different generations, and non-didactic positions that resist easy categorization. Through a combination of clear direction and an openness to engage with new content and form, 'If I Can't Dance' raises the bar in terms of how to structure a research project or schedule a symposium as much as in facilitating ongoing constructive dialogue and connections for participants and audience alike. Conference organizers of 2007, take note.

During the symposium that I attended there was much discussion of whether Feminism is a given in everyday life and how this may or may not inform artistic practice and identity – artist Eva Rothschild, for example, posed the question: 'If I consider myself a feminist, does that then mean I make feminist art?' Also

articulated by Von Hantelmann, discussing the relation of Feminism and performativity as read through Judith Butler, was the desire to address the legacy of Feminism as a theoretical achievement, one that reshapes and renegotiates the idea of transformation in relation to society, politics and art and to elevate discussion beyond engendered body politics and, by extension, the activities of lobby groups. Von Hantelmann's point did indeed raise the discussion to a more sophisticated level beyond that of the binary oppositions and counter-positioning engendered in so much feminist discussion. What's important to remember, though, is that this cerebral break is possible only through the ongoing achievements of a self-consciously active feminist ethics.

A highlight, then, was Frances Stark telephoning her presentation in from Los Angeles. She read a text she had prepared that discussed the dilemma she had faced in deciding whether or not she would be able to attend the conference – how flying from Los Angeles would impact on her work and being with her young son, who could be heard, during her eloquent deliberation, demanding Stark's attention. In one stroke Stark deftly elucidated the dilemma of being a working woman and a mother while attempting to explore the subjective reality of a given situation. In other words, she was smart and funny, created her own framework for her contribution and proposed, like so many women before her, another way of simply getting things done.

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Ah, Feminism

A plethora of feminist-related arts activity in 2007 begs the question – why now?

by Polly Staple

Act

De Appel, Amsterdam

Frederique Bergholtz and Annie Fletcher, co-curators of the second edition of the extensive project 'If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution' – for which they have organized a host of workshops and symposia, a mind- and body-expanding exhibition at De Appel, Amsterdam, and a weekend of performance art in January this year – had planned a surprise for the show's opening night. Artists and guests were ushered out of the venue into the rainy night and onto luxury coaches, and together we traded the city's picturesque waterways and winding streets for what seemed like an hour of interminably regimented sameness of Dutch freeways and suburbia.

A delightfully silly scene ensued: the coach drivers pulled up and turned us out somewhere in the somewhat drab, pre-WWII suburbs of Amsterdam-Noord. On cue the rain came down in buckets, and as our party marched on it soon became clear that no one actually knew where we were supposed to be going. Somehow, we eventually arrived at a square in which, rising up out of the surrounding ordinariness, stood the majestic Zonnehuis (Sun House). Built in 1931, this brick theatre is a local marvel: a social centre with a big Deco-inspired interior and a graceful arch

over its stage, whose parquet floor has been appealingly worn by decades of dancing. In short, it was a setting well worth the hike and the soaking.

The event turned out to be a performance devised and performed by artists Alexandra Bachzetsis and Lies Vanborm. Although it constituted a kind of robotic striptease, *Act* (2007) didn't simply build up to a naked finale tailored for a straight male audience – although their haughty routine could easily have been mistaken for light club entertainment if it hadn't been for the critical and rejuvenating spirit of the host project. *Act* also consisted of a workshop for students with fashion designer Pascale Gatzien to develop costume ideas, an excursion to Paris to visit the legendary Crazy Horse cabaret club, and a meeting with an air guitarist to get some tips on technique. In addition, ten publicity campaigns for the performance were developed by Lies Vanborm's graphic design students at Amsterdam's Gerrit Rietveld Academy around the idea of an 'unannounced performance'. Without any prior knowledge of this, however, it was hard to know what to make of these 'glamour girl' artists stomping around in high heels and Euro-chic outfits with blank faces, or what was intended by their angular 1980s-model poses, the exaggerated big electronic music, the spotlights and slide projections (by Tina Bleuler). Their non-identical twin routine – a choreographed succession of

Alexandra Bachzetsis,
Lies Vanborm and Tina
Bleuler
Act
2006

walks and poses and some partial disrobing – emphasized the female body as a kind of cultural projection field and a two-way mirror. Ultimately it seemed as though these uneasy amateur showgirls were not so much critiquing some of the most extreme stylizations of women in entertainment, as claiming them, for what it's worth, for themselves.

Dominic Eichler



Anarchy courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ and the artist • Act courtesy: If I Can't Dance; photograph: Sal Kroonenberg