

Blows with the Left Hand

Visitor Account on *Refunctioning Authorship* panel session with Tanja Baudoin, Sidsel Meineche Hansen, Fatima Hellberg, Sven Lütticken, and Vivian Ziherl

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The Question of Manet's 'Olympia': Posed and Skirted, a 1989 performance by The V-Girls, provided the starting point for the 'Refunctioning Authorship' panel discussion, held on 29 November in the context of the *If I Can't Dance Performance Days*. A somewhat unlikely starting point, it may seem – for the most conspicuous feature of this work is precisely its critique of the panel discussion as a discursive setting. The practice of the V-Girls, a performance group active in New York during the late 1980s and early 1990s, takes the form of staged panel discussions which dismantle the language of expertise and mock the voice of male academic authority through a series of satirical analyses of works of art and literature. The titles of the papers which comprise the panel on Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) give an impression of the tone and thematic content of the presentations and range from 'The Female Body: My Mommy from 1928 to the Present' to 'The Case of Laura: Are There Any Black People on This Panel?' and 'The Representation of Representation and the Representation of Representation'. Over the course of the presentations, the V-Girls develop a flippant enactment of the conceptual frameworks prevalent in contemporary art – in this case predominantly those of psychoanalysis, deconstruction, gender theory and postcolonial studies – and attack the jargon that drains them from their political force.

The 'Refunctioning Authorship' discussion started from a screening of fragments from *Manet's 'Olympia'* in order to address a number of broader questions situated at the intersection of institutional critique, strategies of appropriation and feminist politics. If the practice of the V-Girls is an instance of institutional critique, then how to understand its specificity? What does it mean to expropriate the language of

expertise – and to appropriate it from the perspective of feminist critique? Or, as it is formulated in the introduction to the panel: ‘Who is this subject that needs a long table to assert its authority?’ While responding to the work of the V-Girls from quite distinct angles, a shared concern emerged from the different presentations: the double question of the historical specificity of the mode of critique instantiated by the V-Girls and of its valency for the present moment.

Sven Lütticken set out to specify exactly what kind of performance is being performed here, examining the work of the V-Girls in the light of Benjamin Buchloh’s distinction between a ‘literal’ performativity and a performativity of a different kind, not bound to the genre of performance art, but infecting traditional artistic media such as painting. For Lütticken, the V-Girls collapse this distinction in their attempt to address the patriarchal element of art history by ‘performatively working through an image’. The presentation of Tanja Baudoin tied the performance practice of the V-Girls to the work of Louise Lawler in order to discuss the position of parody in feminist critique. Focusing on Lawler’s sound work *Birdcalls* of 1972, which enacts the names of successful male artists (including, for instance, Vito Acconci and Lawrence Weiner) as the cries of birds, Baudoin compared how both Lawler and the V-Girls address problems of gender and privilege through an ambiguous type of mockery.

Fatima Hellberg and Sidsel Meineche Hansen, who gave a joint presentation, focused on the body as a site where power relations converge with specific possibilities for resistance and critique. Taking a recent video work by Meineche Hansen (*Seroquel*, 2015) as point of reference, they probed the shifting significance of this problematic in the present by focusing on a number of different examples, spanning from the rise of the pharmaceutical industry to the sale of virtual female bodies in computer-generated imagery shops. In closing, Vivian Ziherl’s contribution situated New York-based appropriation art of the 1980s in relation to a changing mechanics of power, construed in terms of a shift from ‘discipline’ to what Deleuze calls ‘control’. Appropriation art is, in this context, interpreted as a ‘continuation of politics by other means’ – a necessity to redefine the terms of agency and refigure autonomy and self-determination as ‘chosen dependency’.

Taken together, the presentations managed to shed light on the peculiar ambiguity that characterises the work of the V-Girls and the specific mode of critique which might be distilled from it. The satire of *Manet’s ‘Olympia’* is not merely a comical attack on the form of the panel discussion, taken as the emblem of an ossified academic discourse and the power relations it harbours; it cannot be reduced to mere mockery. The V-Girls’ mimicry of empty phrases and hollowed-out procedures undoubtedly aims to shatter an ossified discourse by rendering it ridiculous – but it does so only in order to develop another, different form of critique in the process. The mock panel ironically suspends a dead vocabulary and empty stereotypes, but it is not indifferent to the problematic that this discourse purports to address. Much rather, there is a sense in which the satire here serves as an attempt to save these problems from a petrifying discourse only in order to return to them – to readdress them differently, by other means.

If the V-Girls ‘work through an image performatively’, a crucial effect of this way of working is the backfiring of this analysis on an audience which expected itself to be a mere observant. This critique is activated in the laughter of the audience, which shifts from a consensual and homogeneous laughter about a ridiculed other – the exaggerated stereotype of the academic – to a nervous laughter in which one

finds oneself implicated. Rather than ridiculing the institution of academe from the supposedly external standpoint of the artist, the V-Girls' mock panels figure as a means to reflexively critique the institution of contemporary art itself – the impotency of an art world which, as Jessica Chalmers writes, appears as a 'world of panels'. It is one's own implication in this impotency which becomes palpable in the involuntary bursts of solitary laughter and the tense, obligatory chuckling incited by *Manet's 'Olympia'* – even when the audience is comfortably separated twenty-five years from it. The peculiar funniness of the V-Girls – the main topic of discussion in the second part of the 'Refunctioning Authorship' panel – intimates something more serious: a genuine anger and despair, a commitment to critique within a discourse that seems drained from political significance. The type of address practiced here is an elusive one, which belongs to a form of critique that does not address the audience directly but in an oblique manner, unexpectedly and surreptitiously. If the work of the V-Girls has a specific valency for the present, it might reside in this particular modus operandi, this approach of critique as a blow dealt with the left hand.

This visitor report by Tom Vandeputte was written at the invitation of If I Can't Dance, and follows the panel session *The V-Conspiracy - Refunctioning Authorship*, including presentations by Sidsel Meineche Hansen, Fatima Hellberg, Sven Lütticken, Tanja Baudoin and Vivian Ziherl, that took place during the Performance Days festival, 27 November - 3 December 2014, Amsterdam.