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- 1 For centuries, in order to be able to carve out a place for themselves in the art world, women had to submit to propriety, expectations and assumptions: some of them established their reputation in the still life genre, others produced watercolours or children's portraits, and many had to work as models before they could become artists. Although there is no question of castigating women for their docility or limiting their agency, it is impossible to deny that the artifices they were forced to use in order to exist as artists mainly belonged to the register of compromise and negotiation.
- 2 The 20th century, and particularly its second half, was defined by its radicality, as demonstrated by these seven books. The historical, political, and social events that ran through the century, i.e. that stabbed it, shaking it up, brutalising and wounding it – (wars, feminist and LGBTQI, sexual liberation movements, the expansion of capitalism, struggles for racial equality and civil rights, the AIDS epidemic, and so on) evidently hardened the people who shaped the period. They experienced all these different types of dominations in their very bodies. The violence of wars, discrimination, harassment, sexual abuse and sickness were met with a reactionary violence that spelled out the deliberate refusal to submit, to consent, to remain silent.
- 3 Bodies necessarily appeared as an emblematic locus for this protest. In her book, Nancy Princenthal reconsiders the female artists who took the taboo and traumatic subject of sexual violence head on, physically denouncing what was still impossible to convey with words. Although the video and photographic traces that remain of their performances doubtlessly downplay the intensity experienced during these happenings, they do, however, convey an extreme aggressiveness, aimed not only at the artists themselves, who straightforwardly exhibited their bodies, but at the audience as well, who was directly targeted by these participative artworks. Examples include Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, which she performed for the first time in 1964, and Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, ten years later. Both artists courageously surrendered their bodies to the audience, which was encouraged to strip them naked or damage

them. They challenged women's supposed passivity in the face of sexist and racist violence, in a world where social domination and destructive desires were rife. During the same period, in post-war Austria, VALIE EXPORT developed a critical and political feminist brand of Actionism which included new media such as film and video. Her Actionism found its full expression in public spaces, rather than trapped between the walls of galleries and auditoriums.

- 4 This aspect of the artist's early career, which was very daring for the time, was the theme of the recent exhibition at the Pavillon Populaire in Montpellier, entitled *VALIE EXPORT: Expanded Arts*. The curator, Brigitte Huck, notes that in the 1960-70s, "power, and power relations between the sexes, the political body and its relationship with space had become a central theme. The works analyse the optical, psychological and perceptual aspects of the system of film in its entirety, which, moreover, include EXPORT's most radical performances."¹ For example, *Tapp und Tastkino*, 1968 [Tap and Touch Cinema, which some may deliberately translate as Pat-Down Cinema], condemned the scopophilia that the film industry fuelled, offering instead to experience film through touch. Rather than voyeuristically contemplating the bodies of women they would never meet in the flesh, shrouded in the reassuring darkness of a theatre, the spectators – mere passersby in this action – were encouraged to come and touch the artist's naked breasts in the street. Her chest was hidden in a cardboard box, with two holes cut out for participants to slip their hands inside. Needless to say that when fantasies are forcefully made to happen, they completely lose their appeal.
- 5 However, besides the powerful and active bodies of performers from the 1960-70s, another form of radicality had in fact already emerged in the practice of female post-war abstract artists, in a less spectacular but no less eloquent way. Although this radicality was also expressed physically, through the intensity of artistic gestures, for example by Judit Reigl's violent projections of matter onto her canvases, where they became bursts of colour; it especially and more directly established itself through the absolute choice of creating differently, by deforming and even doing away completely with figuration. The exhibition *Femmes Années 50: au fil de l'abstraction, peinture et sculpture* [Women 1950s: Abstraction, Painting and Sculpture], which took place at the Soulages Museum in Rodez, focused on the little-known part played by women in the so-called second School of Paris, which was vividly experimental, heterogeneous and cosmopolitan. This lively overview admirably includes the artists as well as all those who contributed to defending their works – art historians, gallery owners, critics and collectors (Geneviève Bonnefoi, Cécile Goldscheider, Denise René, Colette Allendy, and so on). The artists "did not comprise an organised legion or a cause, rather, they made progress in disorderly ranks"² – which would incidentally explain their exclusion from art's historical narratives. Each in their own way (from Aurélie Nemours to Joan Mitchell or the sculptor Simone Boisecq), these artists followed the precise path of abstraction, which offered them a refuge that neutralised any possibility of equating them with their genders.
- 6 Performance, video art, and abstraction form entities that question gender and sexual norms. They offer all kinds of territories for invention, where artists carefully take apart contradictions and stereotypes. By attempting to challenge the relegation of women to the status of objectified bodies, they made it possible to raise a number of issues that enrich real or presumed identities. This could be defined as intersectionality by some. Others, such as Fabienne Dumont, may use the more attractive term of

confluence to signal, in the work of Nil Yalter for instance, the meeting points of feminists, immigrant and/or working-class struggles, as well as exile and beliefs. These should all be considered equally without highlighting the domination they may exercise over each other. The art historian Fabienne Dumont has undertaken the significant enterprise of curating a solo exhibition, writing the entire catalogue and interviewing the artist in a very instructive little book that was published in the wake of the AWARE prize in 2018. This is a pleasant way to discover or rediscover the French-Turkish artist's powerful topicality and rich body of work. In the late 1970s, she moved from abstract painting to socio-critical art, combining various media (photography, video, painting, performance and writing). This is exemplified, for instance, by *Topak Eve* (1973), an aluminium, felt, sheepskin and leather yurt that was inspired by poetic and anthropological writings on exile, which Yalter created after having been shocked by the forced settlement of Central Asian nomads. In solidarity with her origins, this was a way of addressing a tangible message of support to the populations that fall victim to the brutal appropriation of transhumance territories. The carpets that decorate the inside of the tent were handmade by women, signalling the existence of an ambivalent female status within the itinerant world of nomadism: on the one hand, yurts are the place where women are confined after their wedding; on the other, they represent a space of their own, which they control and can draw and reflect in. Nil Yalter's work, at once aesthetically strong and socially powerful, is similar in this way to the Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta's production, which was also interpretatively enriched in 2019 through Genevieve Hyacinthe's *Radical Virtuosity: Ana Mendieta and the Black Atlantic*. Through her re-exploration of the artist's oeuvre, which was essentially ascribed to the body-feminism-performance dialectic, Genevieve Hyacinthe makes it interact with the lesser-known religious rituals and beliefs of the Black Atlantic (Santería; El Monté). She sees Ana Mendieta – particularly in the position of artist in exile which she claimed for herself – as an audible mouthpiece for marginalised communities in the institutional artworld. This is the case for the Catholicism-permeated African-Cuban Santería cult which Mendieta's parents practiced in Cuba. The cult is supported by a precise liturgy and repeated actions, sacrifices, offerings, as well as a finely hierarchised chain of initiation and transmission. Genevieve Hyacinthe – who travelled to Mexico to immerse herself in and even reproduce the artist's actions – identified a strong echo with Mendieta's first *Siluetas* which she repeated in the 1970s and saw as resources for bringing people together. The works of Yalter and Mendieta are both emblematic of the very fertile junctions which contribute to actions that may in fact have been forgotten by art history because of their resolutely combative and inclusive dimension. It was on realising this, among other things, that gallery owner Isabelle Alfonsi decided to write in defence of an aesthetics of emancipation, based on an embodied, liberating and wandering concept of art. By attempting to show how a certain kind of art history – white, heteronormative and ableist – has minimised the importance of the political and emotional commitments of artists, the author seeks to create new genealogies, for example through a sexualised reading of the history of American Minimalism and the role of Lynda Benglis, or her analysis of collage through the prism of the Claude Cahun-Marcel Moore couple. Following Isabelle Alfonsi's observation, "it is only once their physical sexual power is no longer perceived as being aggressive (when they grow older), that [female artists] are finally recognised to some extent."³

- 7 Through a comparative reading of these seven works, it is indeed striking to observe the discrepancy in the reception of these artists' works, which, although they were exhibited and well-known at the time, were not spontaneously chosen to represent French art in institutions and on the art market. They often worked concurrently to instituted currents, either within feminist collectives or in clearly more isolated positions. The fact that recent publications make it possible to have a historical reading of the simultaneous publication of these books and these exhibitions' visibility is probably related to the fact that these subjects echo issues that were recently given centre stage. The #MeToo movement, which freed the voices of women reporting harassment and femicides, as well as the migratory crisis and calls for a more inclusive society, have all conditioned our current positive outlook on these female artists, which the wider public seems to only just have discovered. However, within their own artistic perimeters, and ever since the second half of the 20th century, they have been raising the issues that would revolutionise the lives and societies of the following century. Far from being silenced, this feminist radicality energises current debates and can be reconfigured around new action and/or deliberate non-action regimes, such as Judith Butler's combative non-violent ethics, Elsa Dorlin's praise of self-defence and Virginie Despentes's resistance through "exit".⁴ Inertia is no longer in order.
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NOTES

1. Huck, Brigitte. "VALIE EXPORT : *Expanded Arts*", *VALIE EXPORT : Expanded Arts*, Paris: Hazan, 2019, p. 17
2. Decron, Benoît. "Main droite main gauche. Femmes peintres dans le jeu de cartes des années abstraites", *Femmes Années 50 : au fil de l'abstraction, peinture et sculpture*, Paris: Hazan, 2019, p. 17
3. Alfonsi, Isabelle. *Pour une esthétique de l'émancipation : construire les lignées d'un art queer*, Paris: B42, 2019, p. 73
4. See Butler, Judith. *The Force of Nonviolence: The Ethical in the Political*, New York: Verso Books, 2020; Dorlin, Elsa. *Se défendre : une philosophie de la violence*, Paris: La Découverte, 2017; Despentes, Virginie. "Désormais on se lève et on se barre", *Libération*, 1st March 2020