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From Auto-Aggression to Political Instrument

Body Images in the Work of Hannah Villiger and Under the Conditions of Social Media

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The photographic work of Hannah Villiger belongs to a history of iconoclasm. In each of her pictures, a great deal is not shown or is even made unrecognisable. Tight cropping, blurring, underexposed zones – all this conveys the impression that the photographs deny their function as representational images. The most striking thing about them are pictorial distortions. When one thinks of Hannah Villiger, one might even feel a sense of unease, precisely because one can see so little in her pictures. One wonders what kind of attitude to life, indeed, what kind of experience of the world the artist must have had in order to so severely limit the representation that photographs reliably provide. Could this have something to do with the fact that she was ill more often than most people? Or are her reserved, defensive photos more a consequence of the fact that Villiger was influenced by minimal and land art, as well as by other art forms which in turn relied on reduction and denial, as well as at times on rigorous forms of sensual asceticism?

Since Hannah Villiger used her own body as the subject in most of her photographs, thus obstructing its representation, her iconoclastic practices could also be interpreted as evidence of an auto-aggressive attitude. Must she not have struggled with her own body, or at least regarded it with scepticism, if she made its visibility so problematic? And are the deliberate distortions of the images not to be understood as gestures of self-punishment? Indeed, was Villiger not engaging in a symbolic self-obliteration with the way she parcelled out, fragmented, blurred, and discoloured her own body in photographs? Is she perhaps close to an artist such as Günter Brus, who later described his painfully brutal experiments with his own body in actions such as *Zerreissprobe* (Stress Test, 1970) soberly and trivially as "body analyses"?[1] And when Villiger herself noted that she "listened" with the camera "along [her] naked, barren body, around it, into it, through it",[2] one believes one can also read from these words an enormous hardness and coldness, even a will to self-alienation.

1. John Coplans, *Frieze, No. 2*, 1994

2. Thomas Florschuetz, ~~*ohne Titel*~~ *Untitled II-b*, 1986

But apart from the fact that she had to contort, writhe, stretch, or splay herself quite a bit for various shots, Villiger did not really maltreat or even seriously injure her body in the practice of her artistic work. In contrast to Brus and other performance artists, the auto-aggression is articulated solely in the photographs and the tableaus composed from them. Her oeuvre can thus be placed in a different tradition, since artists have repeatedly approached their own bodies photographically in order to dissect them with a ruthlessly analytical gaze to such an extent that the images appear violent.

Like Villiger, John Coplans also dissected his ageing body from the 1980s onwards with a Polaroid camera. In his case, it is almost always possible to recognise which part of the body is depicted, for wrinkles, bulges of fat, or skin blemishes are photographed in such an unadorned manner, as if Coplans only considered himself worthy of being photographed if and to the extent that he looks deformed, perhaps even a little disgusting (fig. 1).

From as early as the 1960s, Lucas Samaras repeatedly placed himself and his body in extreme positions in order to explore himself as fully as possible and to document this in various media, often also with Polaroids. Unlike Villiger and Coplans, he also presents his face, distorting his facial expression to the extreme, as if he were suffering physical or psychological pain – that is to say, as if he were being exposed to violence.

Thomas Florschuetz, who in his early work created in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the 1980s concentrated on his own body, perhaps in a kind of inner exile, also liked to depict parts of his face in exceptional mimic states (fig. 2). And since, like Villiger, he harshly juxtaposes several fragments of the body in tableaus, as if it were dismembered or abstract material, the impression of a use of violence emerges all the more. The abstraction that comes with photographing relatively small portions of the body is, as with Villiger, due to the fact that the camera cannot be held far enough away from the body to record it completely. (Villiger elucidated the predicament – at a time when selfie sticks had not yet been invented – by pointing out that "the greatest distance between camera and body part … is the stretched-out length of my arm to my toes".[3])

For recent art history, one could thus speak of a boom in auto-aggressive body images. But where does this sceptical, dissecting view of one's own body come from? Is it perhaps the articulation of a longstanding mentality that is hostile to the body, often primarily fed by religion? Or is this view the result of internalised ways of talking about bodies, with which every deviation from a purported norm is problematised? Do attempts to provide an image of the body that is as objective as possible thus only make the judgements (prejudices) and violent-aggressive narratives about bodies in general all the more visible?

The significance of the artistic work of Villiger and the other artists mentioned above could then be that they enabled a critical revision of prevailing discourses on the body. Their works could become all the more important because other debates were emerging at the same time that sensitised people to issues surrounding the body. One need only think of Michel Foucault's concept of biopower (*biopouvoir*), which soon became very influential, or Laura Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze vis-à-vis the female body, which established new standards of reflection on body images.[4] At the same time, however, the works of Foucault and Mulvey made us aware of how firmly anchored many conventions related to the human body actually are, and how difficult, protracted, and by no means

irreversible emancipatory attempts would be. Some artistic oeuvres were not enough for this.

At some point, one will presumably come to the view – in historical retrospect – that major changes only became possible when many more people than ever before were able to determine for themselves the images that were created of them and their bodies and made public. First of all, digitalisation had to progress, and smartphones and social media platforms had to establish themselves until, from the noughties onwards, previous ways of looking at and speaking about the body could gradually be overcome.

Despite the fact that, in terms of their rapid producibility, smartphone images may be seen as being in the tradition of Polaroids, there are at least two technical-functional differences between today's photographs of one's own body and projects such as Villiger's. Firstly, smartphones are not only cameras, but also offer numerous features for editing the resulting images. One can make undesirable sections of the image beautiful or put a filter over the entire photo; one can, however, also grotesquely distort oneself with the help of apps, thus disfiguring and semantically coding the respective image in many ways. This is attractive above all because the photos are hardly ever taken just for oneself but are rather – and this is the second difference – generally addressed to others. They are posted, sent as a tweet or a WhatsApp message, so that they have a strong communicative and social function. Hashtags, emojis, or verbal comments along with the pictures further strengthen their message. However, the media infrastructures within which images are created and made public not only give them a binding context, but also favour loud and provocative representations. Even photographs with artistic pretensions are then at the same time beholden to other aesthetics, since they are in direct competition for attention with images with advertising intentions or with many pop-cultural, lifestyle-oriented stagings.

From today's perspective, Hannah Villiger's photographic work therefore appears all the more reserved and reticent; at the same time, however, it serves as a historical model for much of what circulates and has influence in social media today. For it is still a widely shared concern to confront with one's own body in an unembellished way, to capture it objectively and directly, to document parts and phenomena that testify to age, lack of fitness, or illness. Nevertheless, people now want to free themselves from the negative connotations and exchange any critical, defeatist view of their own bodies for a view that shows self-confidence, that they are proud of the way they look. In a huge, communal effort – thanks to hashtags such as #nobodyshame – pursued on innumerable accounts day after day, a reassessment is taking place. While it may be common in some sectors of society to fix every flaw first via digital app and later via cosmetic surgery, in many other sectors people do not want to change their bodies, but rather to distance themselves from possible (and real) criticism of them.

Those who take pictures of their own bodies therefore often even demonstrate pleasure and joy; they celebrate the desire for revaluation, but often use additional means to do so. The English artist and photographer Maisie Cousins, for example, likes to show parts of the body – much like Villiger – in close-up and also not clearly identifiable, but photographs them in full focus and usually also brightly illuminated, moreover oiled, with coloured liquids, or decorated with flower petals, food, or other elements (fig. 3). The images are designed to initially push feelings of aversion to the extreme, but then to allow these feelings to tip in such a way that an unencumbered sensuality is conveyed. The auto-aggressive tendencies of earlier images of the body have thus been completely eradicated, and instead of being confronted with photos that problematise or deny their own pictorial character and thus possess iconoclastic traits, we are presented here with photographs that show as much as possible. (This is presumably another reason why Villiger's photos seem much more violent and auto-aggressive today than they did at the time they were taken.)

3. Maisie Cousins, 2015

While some of Cousins's photos can be understood as offensive portrayals of long-taboo subjects, such as menstruation and obesity, and thus as feminist statements, many other images in social media are created specifically as part of political activist campaigns. They are meant to overcome any pejorative way of talking about bodies and establish instead a plural understanding of beauty. In recent years, the body positivity movement in particular has developed a number of new iconographies and visual languages in this regard, and other projects have developed in political and aesthetic proximity to this, which are in turn aimed at imposing new, more open and more complex standards for the evaluation of bodies.
One such project was initiated in 2018 by the Hungarian-born makeup artist Eszter Magyar on the Instagram account @makeupbrutalism. The reference to Brutalism as an architectural style signals that Magyar is all about using cosmetics in a raw and very direct way. Instead of covering up impurities and serving conventional images of beauty, these are to be deconstructed and replaced. Like Villiger, Magyar prefers to depict sections of the body, abstracted by rotating these by 90 or 180 degrees, mainly to accentuate the skin like a painting surface and the dysfunctionally used cosmetic products like painting materials (fig. 4). One should first see the photo as a colourful image – and only then realise that a face has been painted in a way that goes against any convention of beauty. The first impression is intended to help viewers to break away from previous norms and discover new scope.

However, on the account @makeupbrutalism, there are also photos that were taken without the use of cosmetics and show in a different way how conventions in dealing with the body shape it. For example, trousers or bras often constrict and leave indentations or redness on the skin. Yet they, too, can be photographed in such a way that they suddenly appear

4. @makeupbrutalism (Eszter Magyar), 2020

5. @makeupbrutalism (Eszter Magyar), 2021

as a form of ornament, indeed as alternative body decoration (fig. 5). Once again, the goal here is a revaluation, just as body positivity campaigns and (net)feminist image projects in general are not about making a phenomenon – a wrinkle, a pimple, a redness – disappear, but rather about facilitating the possibility of another – freer, more playful – relationship to it.

In comparison, Hannah Villiger's oeuvre is much less pointed, not only because her images do not reveal much, but also because they are designed for the "white cube", which excludes social, political, or otherwise instrumental contexts. They are meant to be perceived as themselves, in their autonomy. Therefore, Villiger's body images are something fundamentally different from images, however outwardly similar, that have their place in social media. Nevertheless, the latter owe a great deal to the formal decisiveness, rigorous severity, and ruthlessness of Villiger and other artists of her generation. They were the first to experiment with image patterns that were able to develop socio-political relevance decades later under completely different circumstances – and which have since developed to such an extent that the view of the body has actually become different.

[1] https://www.museum-joanneum.at/neue-galerie-graz/sammlung/bruseum/guenter-brus-zerreissprobe (accessed 17 October 2022).
[2] Hannah Villiger, "Zu meinem Buch *Neid*" [1986], in Jolanda Bucher and Eric Hattan (eds.), *Hannah Villiger* (Zurich: Scalo, 2001), 137.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998); Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* 16, no. 3, 1975, 6–18.