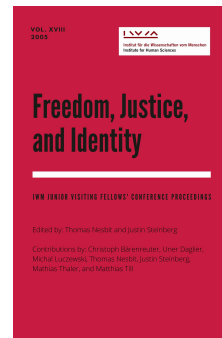


Otto Mühl and the Aesthetics of Seduction

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IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XVIII © 2005 by the author

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In the 1960s, the Viennese Actionists were united under the common task of liberation. For these artists, liberation was broadly conceived, ranging from breaking the limitations of artistic materials to more abstract freedoms, including moral, aesthetic, and even metaphysical forms. Otto Mühl and Hermann Nitsch envision the more abstract conceptions of liberation in critically different ways, at least during their formative years. Nitsch's project continues the avant-garde venture of using myth and psychoanalysis to engage the depths of experience. The downward journey into the cave is then followed by an upward move that transcends what Nitsch calls "animal nature."^[1] Conversely, Mühl's program is carried out on a horizontal plane of immanence, in which one experiences liberation through expanding oneself into unknown zones and intensities. Caught between transcendence and immanence, we can see Actionism as containing both the apotheosis of modernism and the advent of tendencies some consider postmodern.^[2]

These different approaches to liberation also suggest different ways of treating gender. In typical modernist fashion, Nitsch opts to transcend his symbolic wombs, areas he designates as profane or "animal." For him, "feminine" spaces are to be engaged and then overcome. Mühl, on the other hand, questions traditional gender roles, a move that puts him in areas traditionally associated with women. While he ultimately retreats back into an all too wrathful maleness, these flashes of hermaphroditic play present a radical shift in the arts. Although seemingly counterintuitive considering the horrible crimes he committed in the 1970s in beyond, Mühl's early 1960s actions helped shape what became known as the feminist performance art movement.

In this paper, I examine Mühl's work and how some feminist artists have responded. I account for Mühl's favorable reception by positing that it shows a critical move from an avant-garde "aesthetics of violence" to initial experimentations in a democratic "aesthetics of seduction." As we will see, art that operates by principles of seduction has a greater chance of affecting a wide audience, thereby provoking the sort of liberation Actionism advertised. Naturally, keeping in mind the victims of Mühl's darkest moments, I am aware of the dangers of examining his work in this light. As hard as it may be to divorce

his 1960s art from his Actions-Analytic Organization (AAO) of the 1970s and beyond, revisiting his earliest Actionist pieces nevertheless reveals a more complex interaction between women and the artist.

Beginning in 1964, Mühl radically expanded the range of what could be considered fine art by entering terrains traditionally associated with women. He began to use flour, eggs, breadcrumbs, and other groceries as tools of artistic expression. In this breakthrough, art entered the kitchen; Mühl entered the zone of the housewife. Actions, such as his “Mama und Papa” (1964), challenged static gender roles. While he continued to pour substances onto women, Mühl began to commit similar actions onto himself, thereby equalizing the playing field to some degree. Although one finds here suggestions of a hermaphroditic union of the “masculine” and the “feminine,” Mühl’s controlling maleness is preserved, as he is unwilling to share his position of director. Though we have flashes of Mühl the housewife, he becomes Mühl the chef, telling people what to do in his kitchen. The authoritarian move becomes complete when Mühl creates collages from the events and signs his name. Women are relegated to anonymity; their identities may never be recovered.[3] Violence is committed through erasure and silence. Nevertheless, works such as “Mama und Papa” succeed at unsettling traditional conceptions of gender. Much more than Yves Klein or the Fluxus events of the early 1960s, Mühl showed the power that can come out of an autonomous expression of the feminine in performative space, an influence that becomes amplified when the artist enters the ambiguous place between genders.

Rather than a total celebration of dominion over women, Mühl’s work could be read as a self-conscious critique of male sexual economy, in which woman are seen as food to be consumed and expelled. The filmed actions could be seen not as promoting the maltreatment of women, but as critiquing the male gaze. Such interpretations of Mühl are beginning to be offered by scholars such as Alexandra Seibel, who has recently written on how women are depicted in Mühl’s films.[4] In “The Muehlman Perverted Thriller: On the Film Works of Otto Muehl,” she reminds us of Laura Mulvey’s work that critiques how women are framed by the camera in the typical Hollywood thriller. Seibel writes,

The male spectator subject, according to Mulvey, identifies himself not only with the actively operating male protagonist within the film text, but also with the (male) camera gaze. In this deterministic view of the visual order, woman appears as a passive spectacle on the screen presented for male pleasure: a spectacle that can be enjoyed and consumed from a voyeuristic position.[5]

Seibel goes on to argue that Mühl’s art differs from this traditional camerawork, as Mühl presents female subjects in unattractive ways. She writes, “Muehl’s theoretically formulated intentions run expressly counter to his postulated scopophilia, that is, the privilege of an enjoying, male voyeur. Instead, what is presented is the forbidden; but the view of the forbidden is not supposed to provide any pleasure.”[6] If we are to believe Seibel, Mühl’s art, at least on the theoretical level, subverts the unconscious reification of women that happens when men watch films. She stops short of calling Mühl’s work “feminist,” opting instead to call it “radical,” an appellation indeed more fitting.[7]

Yet the thought of even suggesting that Mühl's work could be perceived as feminist is enough to send shivers through many of us, especially those familiar with his communal actions. But we can see Mühl's pieces in dialogue with works one would unequivocally consider feminist. Viennese artist Valie Export was most directly in conversation, as she worked alongside the Actionists and was the first to catalogue their actions.[8] Mühl certainly found a partner in Carolee Schneemann's performances; her definitive "Meat Joy" was performed in 1964, the same year that saw Mühl's "Mama und Papa."

Included in a recent catalogue of Mühl's work, we find statements by various artists that attest to Mühl's impact on their developing vision.[9] A young Viennese artist who draws upon painting, sculpture, photography, and performance, Elke Krystufek offers a surprising take on Mühl. She writes:

As a participant in the women's art movement of the late '90s and early '00s I have decidedly mixed feelings about Otto Muehl's work. [...] Living with his glistening and truly disturbing images gave me the opportunity to examine my own desirous gaze. Was it different from the author's because of gender differences, or was it similar because we both were attracted to women? Are men and women different? I can't remember.[10]

In plain terms, we have a female artist who expresses her uneasiness about Mühl but unapologetically admits that his art provided tools to examine her "own desirous gaze." The most interesting part comes at the end of the statement, when she identifies with Mühl through their shared attraction, prompting her to call into question gender differences. In asking "Are men and women different?" and replying "I can't remember," Krystufek is pointing towards a post-gender shift in the arts.

Some of this shift's origins can be seen in Mühl's pivotal pieces from the early 1960s, where the borders between "masculine" and "feminine" zones become fuzzy. In the concluding part of this paper, I attempt to sketch this shift, in which we find a transition from a male-oriented "aesthetics of violence" towards a post-gender "aesthetics of seduction."

Before jumping into what constitutes the "aesthetics of seduction," I would like to pause to justify why I selected the term. First, "seduction" undermines the military overtones of the avant-garde, a French term originally used to designate the first troops into battle. In the Oxford English Dictionary, the first meaning offered for the verb "to seduce" reads, "To persuade (a vassal, servant, soldier, etc.) to desert his allegiance or service." Second, seduction still carries the avant-garde aspirations of liberation, as it means to lead one astray, for better or for worse. Third, seduction is a non-gender specific term, free of the male connotations that come with avant-garde aesthetics. History has plenty of seducers both male and female; men and women have both been equally seduced. Fourth and finally, seduction draws upon charm and attraction rather than exclusively relying on force and violence.

As a warning, the following layout of the aesthetics of seduction is too vague. To trace such paradigmatic shifts, one needs more examples than Mühl and a handful of other artists I will mention in passing. Nevertheless, I hope you will consider this basic

rendering.

A post-gender rubric, the aesthetics of seduction melts away the gendered distinctions offered by aestheticians past and present.[11] Fine art, no longer a valuable or even necessary distinction, now integrates craft and other art forms once dismissed as “feminine” or “working class.” As we have seen with Otto Mühl, the art of cooking is now brought within the realm of fine art. We also find the motif of play in contemporary works, a radical departure from the solemnity of modernism. Play is often expressed through dress-up techniques and humor in varieties both ironic and sincere. While there are countless examples, the late 1970s *Untitled Film Stills* of Cindy Sherman are perhaps the most known cases of this trend. In addition to play, another trait of the aesthetics of seduction is the reintroduction of beauty. Sculptures, paintings, and other modes of expression become eye-candy, slick advertisements of themselves that incorporate and develop the techniques of advertisements. This trend is often identified with Andy Warhol but continues today through Takashi Murakami and Matthew Barney, artists who have also worked in advertising. The reintroduction of beauty does not supplant the sublime; rather, the categories co-exist, feeding upon one another, melting into one another, all in non-gender specific ways. In some cases, we find the iconography of both genders playing together in harmony, creating a hermaphroditic union.

The demise of hierarchies in these artworks creates multiple points of entry. The democratic fusion of high and low forms of expression allows people from different worlds to interact with art. Almost everyone, at least those situated in Western cultures, can access a Campbell soup can. Furthermore, the introduction of food is an invitation for us to come and feast. As art uses beauty to advertise itself, people are invited to join the conversation, a trend accelerated by reproductions on postcards, postage stamps, and websites. Art seduces us with its horror, with its beauty.

For these reasons, art that operates according to an aesthetics of seduction provides great potential for social change. If one can still speak of liberation, and I think we can, this art can reach those most in need of freedom, whether it be from ignorance and or more tangible restraints. By presenting art through digital reproduction and advertisements, it has a better chance of actually reaching the working class, providing them with the tools to imagine a greater tomorrow. While this may sound too idealistic, I have personally seen it work.

Many questions remain, however, on how best to reach the public through art. In some cases, as with Actionism, the art is the action itself; the photographs and paintings are only relics that provide some trace of the aura. It is difficult to translate such art experiences into the 1s and 0s, the bottom line of digital calculus. Even so, I believe this is a project worth attempting, and we already see it at work today in museums. At both the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the MUMOK in Vienna, the public is invited free of charge to view performances on DVD and flip through books in their libraries. But should art still be presented within sanctioned arenas or should it move beyond? Where best to exhibit arts? Temples, tabernacles, books, TV sets? Although the problem of presentation remains open for debate, I hope you will agree that art which operates using principles of seduction provides a better chance for social change.[12] In this paper, I have attempted

to identify some of the roots of these aesthetics in the work of Otto Mühl and art that builds upon its breakthroughs. Although his art would eventually become more and more like his conservative compatriots, creating all too rigid gender distinctions, his mid-1960s performances point towards a new variety of aesthetics, one that is still evolving.

Notes:

1. See “The Blood Organ” manifesto in *Writings of the Vienna Actionists*, ed. Malcolm Green; Atlas Press, London, 1999.

2. See Ihab Hassan’s “Culture, Indeterminacy, and Immanence: Margins of the (Postmodern) Age” in *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*. Ohio State University Press, 1987.

3. This point is exacerbated by the absence of detailed information about the women in his performances. In Mühl’s outlines for the actions, we rarely find specific women named. Rather, he often describes the physical traits he seeks.

4. See Seibel, “The Muehlian Perverted Thriller: On the Film Works of Otto Muehl,” (pgs 102-107), *Otto Muehl: Aspekte einer Totalrevolution*. Köln, 2004.

5. Ibid 104.

6. Ibid 104.

7. Ibid 104.

8. See Weibel, Peter and Valie Export *Wien. Bildkompendium Wiener Aktionismus und Film*. Frankfurt 1970.

9. *Otto Mühl: Leben, Kunst, Werk*. Verlag der Buchhandlung König, 2004.

10. Ibid 394.

11. Here I am thinking about Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and philosophers in their windfall who gender the beautiful and sublime. I am also thinking of aestheticians who devalue working class and “feminine” forms of expression, relegating such works to the status of craft. This tendency can be found as early as the ancient Greeks through distinctions made between *techne*, *mimesis*, and *poeisis*.

12. Some of the most interesting thoughts on these problems can be found in Susan Sontag’s recent book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Picador, New York, 2003. Sontag rightly notes that photographs “weigh differently” depending on where they are exhibited, be it an art museum, a newspaper, a pop magazine, or shopping mall (see in particular pages 119-22).

Preferred citation: Nesbit, Thomas. 2005. Otto Mühl and the Aesthetics of Seduction. In *Freedom, Justice, and Identity*, ed. T. Nesbit and J. Steinberg, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows’ Conference Proceedings, Vol. 18.