



Title

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Cover image: **Fig. 5** Performance view of *Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Cologne and New York; photograph Nadine Fraczkowski).

Anne Imhof

by Philomena Epps • 28.05.2019

Anne Imhof's four-hour durational work *Sex* (2019) was staged over five nights in late March at Tate Modern, London, as this year's *Tate Live* exhibition. Imhof's *œuvre* has defied easy categorisation, blending the mediums of performance, dance, painting, sculpture, installation, sound and technology, and the industries of art, fashion and music: her work is a happening, an event, a scene. The exhibition's capacious title and its openness for interpretation follows on from *Faust* (2017) and *Angst* (2016), the former being Imhof's presentation for the German Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, for which she won the prestigious Golden Lion. The award – a can of Stella Artois balanced between its wings – is one of the many objects strewn across the Tanks at Tate, along with smashed iPhones, motorcycle helmets, a pair of black patent shoes, steel BDSM collars and harnesses, oranges, cigarette lighters, basketballs, electronic weighing scales, pipes and other drug paraphernalia, band T-shirts, towels, Marshall guitar amps and altar candles.

The vast landscape of *Sex* occupied both the South and East Tanks, with the majority of the objects littering the grubby carpets lining the Transformer Gallery, their selective miscellany used to signify the debris of a bedroom, the residue of a party, pertaining to both individual tastes and group dynamics. Imhof's abstract paintings hang on the walls. The glossy surfaces of some are scraped and scratched like keyed car parts, while others, with their gradient of chrome yellow dissolving into black, simulate a solar eclipse, black hole, or horizon line **FIG.1**. Greyscale silk-screen prints of the model Eliza Douglas – Imhof's creative and romantic partner, and arguably the star of her performances – are also displayed, her mouth agape in a silent scream. 'The working title for the piece originally was *Death Wish*', Imhof has commented; 'I kept returning to these words, this notion. The fact that [the] title transformed in my concept from death to *Sex* brings up a question of annihilation'.¹ In the South Tank, lit only by pulsing strobe lights, the audience looks down on the action from a raised stadium platform **FIG.2**. While in the East Tank, it is the performers who stalk the overhead walkways of the intervening wooden pier structure, or occupy a narrow corridor created behind a wall of transparent security glass **FIG.3**.

The performers appear disassociated, staring back at the audience with an exaggerated blank disregard that borders on contempt **FIG.4**. Grippled by ennui, they recline on mattresses on the

floor, leaning and squatting against walls, or climbing ladders to stand or sit on white platforms akin to diving boards. Looking into the distance, they vape languidly, smoke billowing from their mouths. There is an oral fixation: they slap their faces, gasp, pant and lick. The energy ebbs and flows, minor to major, apathy to frustration to violence. A waltz transforms into a wrestle **FIG.5**. There is crawling, stroking, pushing, moshing, and head banging. Bags of Tate & Lyle sugar are emptied out gratuitously. Plastic-wrapped bouquets of dried roses are slowly doused in petrol and set on fire, or occasionally bashed against padded columns, their petals spiralling to the floor. Bodies bash themselves against these columns too. Cans of beer are shaken up then opened, foam spraying across the glass. One performer repetitively whips his shadow, the sound of the leather bullwhip cracking against the concrete. Sometimes the performers move together, marching in unison, interlocking limbs **FIG.6**, carrying one another **FIG.7**, or falling into each other's arms in an extended trust exercise. The aggressive rhythm of industrial electronic music throbs and pulses, interweaved with baroque, classical, tango. There are intervals of silence, the stillness interrupted by the occasional dirge song or the deafening guitar chords that ricochet through the space.

There is dramaturgy and a score, with scenes and sequences of movement and action all attentively structured, conceived with room for initiative, response and improvisation. The theatrical, situation-based nature of the performances – the union of choreographed gesture, *tableaux vivant*, soundscapes and song – situates Imhof as a contemporary descendent of expressionist German Tanztheater. Typically in Tanztheater there is no narrative plot, but the presentation of specific situations, human conflicts, or trains of thought. Pina Bausch would develop the gestures and dialogues in her productions by mining feelings, experiences, and memories from members of her company, the Tanztheater Wuppertal. 'The creation of these large-scale pieces necessitated a significant level of trust between choreographer and cast, requiring a demanding degree of engagement and sacrifice from the dancers', Lucy Weir notes, describing Bausch as a 'collagist, piecing together the efforts of the collective group and synthesising the movement into a more homogenous vocabulary, making works with, and upon, the bodies of her dancers'.² Imhof has been working closely with her core group from as early as 2012. Although her key collaborators are Douglas and Billy Bultheel, nine of the fifteen performers are cited as developing *Sex*. 'There is a strong tendency to copy certain gestures and elements that one person brings in', Imhof has said; 'I like how [the collaborators] put a lot of their world and aesthetics in the work, and how this works with other perspectives'.³ During the performance, Imhof watches from the crowd, sending directions or feedback via text message.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. (Courtesy Tate; photograph Oliver Cowling and Andrew Dunkley).

In *Performance in Contemporary Art* (2018), Catherine Wood suggests that performance art today might connote ‘a space not just for performed action, but *a space of active relations: a space in which things happen*’.⁴ In *Sex*, this space of active relations manifests in a very specific way. The temporality mirrors the circadian rhythm of a nightclub; time is decelerated, paused and stretched, seemingly endless. The occupant capacity of each space in the Tanks is limited, and while the performers are able to move freely between them, members of the audience are forced to continually reposition themselves throughout the performance: entering and exiting through the doors guarded by security staff. The extended periods of inertia or inactivity in the performance feeds into a simmering energy of anxiety and frustration, with people jostling and elbowing – at some points even desperately racing one another – to catch the action. The work’s focus on fluidity and binaries – the ‘sex’ – has a bearing on the shifting power relationship between audience and performer. Imhof is attempting to destabilise the dynamic within viewing practices that has traditionally prioritised the spectator, with the audience demoted to passing bystander or accidental witness. Although the cadence is different, this mode of engagement recalls the provocative live performances of the British musician and artist Dean Blunt, which are occasionally designed to antagonise his audiences, with his conceptual events becoming a hyper-pastiche and critique of a particular cultural scene. ‘If art, in its broadest sense, offers a way for us to look at ourselves and reflect on our time - a kind of symbolic mirror’, Wood posits, ‘then performance within art stages us in the act of observing ourselves: it produces a two-way mirror’.⁵

Anyone who did not see *Sex* could have experienced it via the

multiple images and videos that immediately began to circulate online. This widespread virtual dissemination disrupted the real-time encounter by allowing the performance to fragment into various repetitive or abridged videos and snapshots. In her new book, *Performing Image* (2019), Isobel Harbison explores how subjectivity is being formed through these circuits of image production, consumption and exchange, with contemporary digital culture being 'vigorously inscribed, or encouraged, by technology capital'.⁶ Her prognosis begs the question of whether our drives are implanted in us by the images we are fed, and if so, how we might assert our position within them: 'we perform the images that precede us, and, repeated, these performances congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, a system that regulates, disciplines, and divides us among others'.⁷ Harbison's use of the 'prosumer' analogy – where one is producer and consumer – is also useful. By following and photographing the performance, the viewer becomes a contracted partner, participating in a narrative of engagement that blurs the visual and the haptic. This is also interesting when thinking about the appearance of Imhof's core audience. The athleisure worn by her performers, for example, is often indistinguishable from the sartorial choices made by those in the crowd. The clothing becomes a uniform with semiotic potential, with the references existing in an endless loop of mutual repetition.



Fig. 2 Performance view of *Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Cologne and New York; photograph Nadine Fraczkowski).

It has been argued that after her work was accused as being too photogenic, around the time of *Angst*, Imhof began to embed the critique into her work, to 'own the situation' of her aesthetic.⁸ Her invitation for non-dancers – such the model Sacha Eusebe, who Douglas met on a Balenciaga shoot, and the singer/songwriter

Nomi Ruiz – to also join the Sex ensemble, further cements the significance of this image-conscious selectivity. Her work has been accused of being elitist, vacuous, even fascistic.⁹ There are critiques of narcissism too. I see the narcissism as an active strategy, rather than passive. In the late twentieth century, as argued by Kathy O'Dell, performance and body artists used masochism 'to reveal symbolically the structure of agreements that we make as we try to come to terms with an unsettling, indeterminate consciousness of our own bodies'.¹⁰ I would argue that Imhof employs narcissism akin to this use of masochism, to reveal how the incessant digital rendering of the self, to represent the body as a virtual object, is a way in which to cope with this indeterminate self. The spectrum of affect mimics the mechanics of alienation in art and everyday life, blurring the boundaries between being an autonomous subject and an image of a wider cultural sphere.

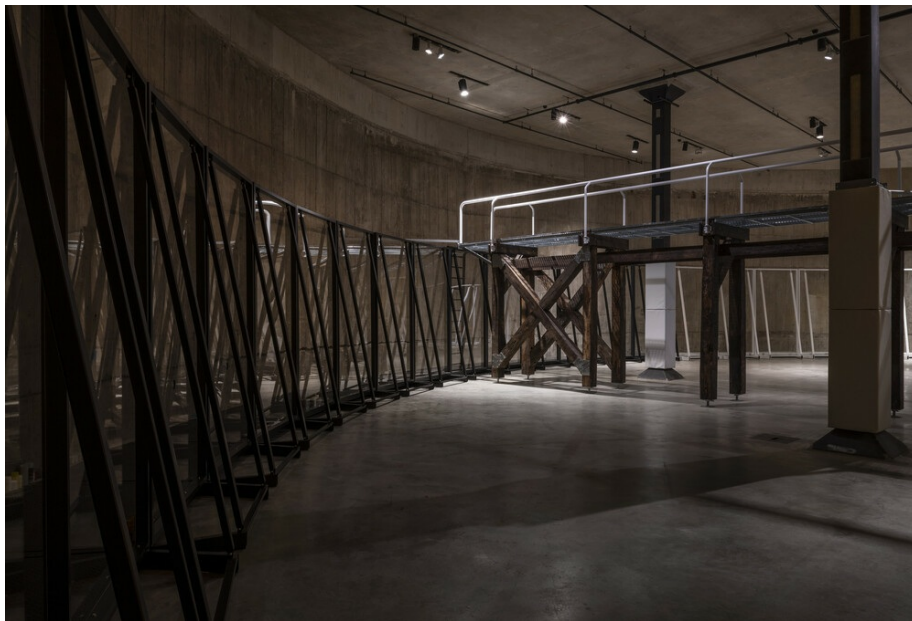


Fig. 3 Installation view of *Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. (Courtesy Tate; photograph Oliver Cowling and Andrew Dunkley).

I think of Hannah Wilke, another female artist accused of narcissism, also known for a performance initiated from behind a sheet of glass.¹¹ In the 16mm silent video made in 1976 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art – *Hannah Wilke Through the Large Glass* – Wilke enacted a slow and methodical deadpan striptease behind the highly mythologised monument of modern art: Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (known as the *Large Glass*). In a provocative gesture, Wilke exaggerated and appropriated the objectification of the female body by the male gaze, and its relationship to avant-garde art. Duchamp's sculpture 'both defines the space in which the artist acts, and it redoubles the lens of the reproductive apparatus recording the performance', writes Mechtild Widrich, continuing that in 'museums, glass not only forms a barrier between work and

beholder, protecting one from the other, it is also a crucial visual signifier of the transformation of a thing into an exhibit'.¹² This transformation of a 'thing' into 'an exhibit' is also a dynamic that is constantly played out in *Sex*. The platforms and mattresses often function like classical plinths, physically and allegorically elevating bodies to become sculpture, while the choreography is often comprised of fragmented images, of poses. In her defence of the 'radical' narcissism of Wilke's work, Amelia Jones quotes from 'Posing', Craig Owens' 1984 article on Barbara Kruger; 'to strike a pose is to present oneself to the gaze of the other as if one were already frozen, immobilised – that is, *already a picture* [. . .] reflecting the power back on itself, pose forces it to surrender [. . .] the gaze itself is immobilized, brought to a standstill'.¹³ Kruger was part of the Pictures Generation, a group of artists engaged in deconstructing and appropriating images from mass media, and there are traces of that rampant cycle of visual consumption in the mechanics of Imhof's performances.

It is through the voyeuristic eyes of the audience (and perpetually recorded through the third eye of their iPhone appendages), that Imhof's performers become media to be shared and consumed: 'Total Image [. . .] turned] into an object [. . .] classified into a file'.¹⁴ These 'image files' became classified in the archive of my own mind, alongside other works of art or cinema. Standing tall on their wooden piers, there was something sublime in the active stillness of the performers, poised like Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c.1818), while the waves of people crashed and simmered below them. The frenetic performer who aggressively whirled and spun into the crowd blended with Marina Abramović and Ulay's crash and embrace in *Relation in Space* (1976), while the topless model boys lounging listlessly in the Transformer Gallery begin to merge with Uli Edel's shots of pallid youths waiting and looking to score in the tunnels of Bahnhof Zoo in his filmic adaptation of *Christiane F* (1981). Brutality bleeds into tenderness. I think of the sentence Chantal Akerman used to encapsulate her documentary portrait of Pina Bausch, as 'sadistic horror amidst beauty'.



Fig. 4 Performance view of *Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Cologne and New York; photograph Nadine Fraczkowski).



Fig. 5 Performance view of *Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Cologne and New York; photograph Nadine Fraczkowski).



Fig. 6 Performance view of *Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Cologne and New York; photograph Nadine Fraczkowski).



Fig. 7 Performance view of *Anne Imhof: Sex* at Tate Modern, London, 2019. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Cologne and New York; photograph Nadine Fraczkowski).

Exhibition details **BMW Tate Live Exhibition: Anne Imhof: Sex**
Tate Modern, London
22nd–31st March 2019

Footnotes

- 1 *Anne Imhof: Sex*, exhibition booklet (Tate Modern, London, 2019) in conversation with Catherine Wood.
- 2 L. Weir: 'Bodies of Work: Pina Bausch's Legacy,' *Orlando*, available at <http://www.wea-reorlando.co.uk/page110.php>, accessed 28th May 2019.
- 3 Imhof, *op cit.* (note 1).
- 4 C. Wood: *Performance in Contemporary Art*, London 2018, p.10.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.173.
- 6 I. Harbison: *Performing Image*, Cambridge MA 2019, p.184.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.171.
- 8 Franziska Aigner in conversation with Meadhbh McNutt, in 'Behaving', *TANK* (June 2017), available at <https://tankmagazine.com/tank/2017/06/franziska-aigner/>, accessed 20th May 2019.
- 9 'Imhof and her partner, Eliza Douglas ... have decided to invade these radically subversive and critical voids with the hypertrophic logic of collective narcissistic personality disorders, grafting the fashion industry's ever more voracious and desperate forms of compulsive self-affirmation onto the increasing despair of current artistic production (or vice versa)', from B.H.D. Buchloh: 'Rock paper scissors', *Artforum* 56, 1 (2017), pp.279-89. Available at <https://www.artforum.com/print/201707/benjamin-h-d-buchloh-on-some-means-and-ends-of-sculpture-at-venice-muenster-and-documenta-70461>, accessed 20th May 2019.
- 10 Kathy O'Dell quoted in A. Jones: *The Artist's Body*, London 2012, p.32.
- 11 'Hannah Wilke, a glamour girl in her own right ... is considered a little too good to be true when she flaunts her body in parody of the role she actually plays in real life ... her own confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist ... has resulted at times in politically ambiguous manifestations that have exposed her to criticism on a personal as well as on an artistic level', from L. Lippard: 'The pains and pleasures of rebirth: European and American women's body art', in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art*, New York 1995, p.103.
- 12 M. Widrich: 'The fourth wall turns pensive: Feminist experiments with the camera,' in G. Schor, ed.: *Feminist Avant-Garde: Art of the 1970s*, Munich 2016, p.73.
- 13 A. Jones: 'The rhetoric of the pose: Hannah Wilke and the radical narcissism of feminist body art,' in *idem: Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis 1998, p.154.
- 14 R. Barthes: *Camera Lucida*, transl. R. Howard, London 1984, p.14.

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