

The impossible non-action

by Maria Bordorff

“A new washing machine is what people understand as revolutionary,” a teacher said in a lecture on the current perplexity surrounding modern life, followed by: “Nobody knows what revolution means today. Nobody knows how to mobilise and together force the change that the world needs to happen.” What change does the world need? One then asks oneself, and it is perhaps here we find the “problem”: We live in a pluralistic era, in which the world’s well-being isn’t black and white—fortunately. But that also means we are now able to look for models for change beyond the past century’s demonstrations and uprising, because what are we to write in capital letters on our signs and banners? What clear demands can we collectively manifest?

Three large, black-painted banners hang outside the entrance to Viborg Kunsthall. They are the first thing visitors see as they approach the building. The volume of black paint gives the banners weight and an angry, action-like aesthetics, but their content doesn’t translate easily into anything readable. It’s like they have been crossed out, censured, or as if nothing had ever been written on them in the first place. The banners were produced by Marie Thams and are part of the exhibition *The resonance of action* (Handlingens resonans), which she and her colleague Maj Hasager have made for Viborg Kunsthall’s East Wing. The banners become an image of the urge to say something, to do something, without being able to give the utterance or action form.

On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of women’s right to vote in Denmark, Thams and Hasager have let their artistic practices merge in a joint exhibition project, in which gender and political positioning are the central questions and in which action and today’s feminism are taken into account. Both artists regularly work with political issues, but whereas Hasager uses extensive archival research and material as a point of departure for her critical and information-driven response to history writing, Thams’s method is more abstract and visually exploratory. In the exhibition the two artists let their works—in all their difference—complement each other and together create a whole. The exhibition thus consists

of sound pieces, slide projection, performance, archival material, and a large spatial installation on the ground floor, presenting historical fragments of texts that blend with visual, symbolic gestures.

The exhibition grew out of the artists’ shared opinion that the debate around gender in Denmark has become deviant and regressive. Both point to the missing space for discussing questions of equal rights in a Danish context and to how attempts to make room for this are often shot down in the public discourse, which is governed by the notion that equal rights have already been achieved and thus feminism doesn’t have anything to fight for anymore. Thams and Hasager feel a shared responsibility to take action and to shed light on today’s feminist position—a responsibility they feel as women, as artists, as human beings.

The debate about gender *is* struggling in Denmark. It often stagnates in discussions about quota systems, sex work, and breastfeeding, and feminists are viewed as rabid killjoys who have gone too far in their demands. This we can see in, among other places, the commentaries in the media’s often one-dimensional debate sections, where, at times, a hateful tone is used in discussion of feminist initiatives. In the meantime, feminism is about much more than gender: it is about class, social structures, and cultural power relations, to mention just a few things. In short, feminism is about equal rights between human beings arising through information and structural change. In Denmark we are currently experiencing a growing gap between the rich and the poor, and discrimination continues to happen at several levels. Discrimination can appear to be “invisible,” such as when it happens structurally or through the architecture that surrounds us. Thams has incorporated the latter in a voluminous installation in the East Wing’s main space. A wooden staircase—whose lower steps are wider than the upper—forces a hierarchical gesture in the space; fewer and fewer people fit the higher it goes. On the top step, you can sit and lean against the end wall and, with a view of the exhibition, listen to the sound piece *It’s not about my gender, it’s about my hand* (Det handler ikke om mit køn, det handler om min hånd) (2015). In the site-specific sound piece, Thams’s voice mentions various body parts, capabilities, and other attributes that are tied to what one can assume is woman’s political position.

Architecture mirrors society’s visions and notions about the people who inhabit it, now and in the future. When, for example, fitness gear is installed for public use in larger cities’ parks where benches would be found previously, what is encouraged and applauded is the active, fully functioning human being. And the “resting areas” or meeting points for everyone else are moved out of the city centre, pushed out by the ruling ableism. When Thams makes her sound piece

available only to those who make their way up the overdimensional staircase, she mirrors exactly this kind of social mechanism and the “invisible” forms of discrimination perpetrated by built space.

Feminism today faces a widespread lack of apprehension of its width and topicality, while internal divisions in radical and neoconservative factions simultaneously complicate the broader feminist agenda. In addition to this comes the struggle to dissociate contemporary feminism from 1970s feminist aesthetics and jargon, which are still seen as definitive of what it means to be a feminist.

Thams and Hasager are aware that their exhibition may face scepticism and preconceived opinions about its central issues and aesthetic decisions. When two female artists make an exhibition about gender and political positioning, and when banners and flags wave in a slightly provocative manner in and outside the exhibition space, then it may send off alarm bells for some of the audience. But the use—or reuse—of the caricature-like and symbolic forms of expression functions both as a revisiting of history and as a pointing to the feminist fight’s topicality. On top of this, what comes to the fore is how the recontextualisation of action aesthetics from the past century gives the current revolutionary climate—or the lack thereof—a new perspective. The past’s clear demands, written in capital letters, lifted over the masses, gathered in a joint cause, stand in contrast to today’s perplexed and individualised state—to our empty banners and signs. And it isn’t because we can’t find our way to the streets. We are damn good at supporting and celebrating the individual’s victory, when we in thousand-fold gather as spectators of the marathons in the city. But this very thousand-fold can only seldom mobilise as a group with a joint objective.

This year’s celebration of women’s right to vote in Denmark is a celebration that is certainly legitimate in all its facets, but that also becomes a shallow hurrah for the people and for a society that to some extent forgets the previous fights that have led us to this moment. Fights fought by individuals. For the exhibition Maj Hasager has dived into the story of Danish politician and women’s rights advocate Elna Munch, thus continuing her series *Hymns to unknown heroines* (2013–), which was shown, among other places, at Malmö Art Museum in 2014 and which sheds light on woman’s unwritten history. Munch was, in 1918, one of the first four women voted into the Danish Parliament, where she was the only female representative for the Danish Social Liberal Party (Det Radikale Venstre). Hasager, using Munch’s political speeches as a source material, has made an installation out of fragments from a 1913 speech, which is accompanied by a sound piece she composed using statistics of women representatives in the Danish Par-

liament up until today.

With *Hymns to unknown heroines* Hasager creates her own version of the official stories about the fight for equal rights in the suffragette era. She brings the individual’s actions into focus in the grand populist storylines while highlighting the subjective approach inherent to history writing.

For the exhibition at Viborg Kunsthall, Hasager has also continued her ongoing work with alternative coverage of the global suffragette movement—for example, focusing on the Swedish feminist Frigga Carlberg as well as including found black-and-white photographs of a group of unknown women in 1920s Scotland. The photographs go from being memories of a time past to becoming crucial components in the documentation of woman’s unwritten history. Hasager’s series develops as she works with different national suffragette movements and creates connections between women active internationally.

There’s a lot at stake in this first major exhibition collaboration between Marie Thams and Maj Hasager. The many gestures and crossings in time and place create a dynamic exhibition that makes use of strong words and overgrown constructions but that also deals with the subtle, abstract, and poetic. As the title puts forward, the exhibition is about *taking action* and about the resonance that action creates. It is a clean cut that opens all gates—in order to hold all actions accountable: the individual action, the collective action, history writing’s action, the artists’ action, the Kunsthall’s action, Elna Munch’s action, Hasager’s action when she brings out Munch’s action. Even *non-action* and its resonance is examined. Because even when we do not take action, we act.

The resonance of action is thus a call for action and for taking a stand, but it is also—and just as importantly—a call for reflection and for fostering a sense of responsibility for the actions we already and all the time carry out and that resonate in our history, in our architecture, in our parks. If the radical revolution can’t happen, then perhaps the many “small” gestures from all directions can push us towards different and necessary improvements of society. Non-action is, under no circumstances, possible. Let us thus make room for discussing all that we are already doing and let’s do something about it.

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