

Tanya Leighton

10 MARIANNE WEX
Let's Take Back Our Space

Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin
By Jesi Khadivi

In the mid-1970s, the German artist Marianne Wex walked the streets of Hamburg with a medium-format camera taking candid photographs of men and women in public space. She amassed a collection of over five thousand images from 1972 to 1977: old couples sitting on park benches, men sunbathing with splayed legs, and women standing waiting for trains or busses with their feet demurely pointing inwards, among other quotidian street scenes. Decades before the contentious term "manspreading" entered the popular imaginary (and the Oxford dictionary), Wex studied how men and woman physically occupy space, and supplemented the resulting photographs and observations with imagery culled from advertisements, infographics, publicity shots, pornography, and art-historical textbooks. She collated this material into large paste-up panels that broke down "male" and "female" body language into highly specific and idiosyncratic typologies. The resulting work, *Let's Take Back Our Space*, was exhibited for the first time at ngbk in Berlin in 1977. An expanded book project followed in 1979, entitled *Let's Take Back Our Space:*

"Female" and "Male" Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures.

Now, over forty years later, a selection of Wex's collages has returned to Berlin in an exhibition that spans both of Tanya Leighton Gallery's spaces. Two panels hung at slight diagonals flank the viewer upon entering the show. The panel on the left-hand side documents facial expressions from classical religious statuary, drawing attention to the stately furrows of the male brow and the beatific unlined faces of different permutations of the childlike virgin. Wex juxtaposes these observations with contemporary examples of faces in the right-hand panel, which she culls from various advertisements and publicity photographs of headshots from men and women working in "politics and other professions." As with the statuary, Wex carefully labels the source of each image and accompanies each panel with a brief explanatory text - in this case, outlining how the styling, positioning of the head, and makeup conveys the idea of competence or passivity, respectively. The effect of Wex's deadpan, serial arrangements recall the rigorous compositions of the German photographer duo Bernd and Hilla Becher, who systematically photographed and arranged categories of individual industrial

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systematically photographed and arranged categories of individual industrial structures into comparative grids – what they called “families of objects.” Yet while the Becher’s typologies eliminated any trace of subjectivity, the “families” of gesture and body language that Wex compiles operate on both an analytical and affective level – one driven not only by measured observation, but the unwavering passion of a collector. Trite as the binary comparisons that open the exhibition might seem at first glance – active/passive, strong/weak, experienced/childlike – the exhibition gathers momentum and depth as panels with Wex’s own street photographs are put into the mix. Gesture and body language have the capacity to communicate that which is absent from speech. As linguist Arika Okrent observes, “Gestures are thoughts, ideas, speech acts made tangible in the air.” Wex breaks her study of body language and positioning down into subtle, minute details. How do we hold our hands? Tilt our heads? Just how far apart do we position our legs? By honing in on such minutiae, Wex makes an impassioned argument about how we position our bodies and how even the most trivial and mundane elements of our body language speak volumes of our relationship to power. *Let’s Take Back Our Space* remains (un)surprisingly relevant today. The sheer exhaustiveness of its catalogue of physical gestures also points to other forms of space that are less prone to visualization: mental space, emotional space. As Rebecca Solnit notes, all power can be understood in terms of space – unequally occupied.

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