

Stronger and Weaker Sexes: Remarks on the Exhibition

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In 1908, the Genevan politician and essayist William Vogt wrote the book *Sexe faible* (The Weak Sex), in which he examines the "natural" weaknesses and inabilities of the female gender. Intended as a "response to absurd exaggerations and feminist utopias,"¹ since then the catchy title has shaped the battle of the sexes as a dictum. Like Otto Weininger's misogynistic study *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character, 1903), *Sexe faible* is one of the texts from the turn of the previous century that justified the legal, political, and social subordination of women based on their anatomical and, according to the opinion of the author, thus also intellectual inferiority in comparison with men.² The perception of women as the "weak sex" persisted tenaciously. It is first in recent years that this ascription has slowly been shifted to men, as for instance in the report by neurobiologist Gerald Huther called *Das schwache Geschlecht und sein Gehirn* (The Weak Sex and His Brain) published in 2009. Polemics has long since yielded to statistics, and the most recent biological discoveries are gaining currency, such as the fact that male babies are already at risk in the womb because they lack a second X chromosome.³ This genetic "weakness" would apparently lead seamlessly to a social weakness, since males more frequently have problems in school, turn criminal, and die earlier.⁴ In addition to the findings on biologically based weaknesses also comes the social, economic, and political challenge, which has for some years been discussed as a "crisis of masculinity." With this metaphor, "an attempt is made to apprehend all the changes that contribute to the fact that the dominance of the male gender, which was formerly consolidated to a large extent, ... has lost the obviousness of being self-evident."⁵ Nothing therefore demonstrates the transience of gender stereotypes more clearly, and one might rightly ask whether the earlier "weaknesses" might long since have come to be considered new "strengths." The exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern takes up the thread that was already spun by the small but noteworthy exhibition in Switzerland *Helden Heute* (Heroes Today) in 2005.⁶ At that time, the focus was put on hero images in contemporary art and on society's current need for strong men in art and politics.⁷ The current exhibition in Bern, in contrast, argues quite differently that specifically images of "weak" men best represent the social and cultural liberation movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The fact that men today are allowed to express their feelings publicly, as is shown for instance by the example of the exceptional Swiss athlete Roger Federer, or that they are staged by female artists as object of desire and no longer as subject of desire is a crucial innovation in the visualization of gender identities. After various exhibitions in recent years were dedicated to gender relations, gender imprinting, or the social latitude in performative stagings of gender,⁸ the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern focuses exclusively on men in contemporary art for the first time.⁹ It brings together the points of view of male and female artists who deal either with their own experiences with men and/or being a man, or with an examination of the images of men that are available. This exhibition has been long overdue. Nonetheless, what first needs to be overcome is the perception that "gender" themes are a woman's matter and that only marginalized positions have addressed their social gender. Hegemonic male types—thus men who, according to general opinion, embody the dominant masculine ideal most convincingly—have only been reflected in public through media for a relatively short time, even though the male gender is also a sociocultural construct, just like that of women, transgender, or inter-gender individuals.¹⁰ What comes to be expressed here is the invisibility of norms. As is generally known, it is those social groups that hold the most power that actually expose their own status the least. In Western cultural tradition, these are physically sound, white heterosexual men.¹¹ They remain the norm unchallenged as a "blind spot" without their position of power and their power to make decisions ever becoming a focus. The masculine-heterosexual dom-

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inance succeeds in "remaining out of the question itself," as the art historian Irit Rogoff has criticized, by subordinating all representations of the "other" to their own norm, including women, individuals with a different sexual orientation, and non- whites.¹² The fact that male bodies are becoming visible today in the most unexpected places is demonstrated in a striking way by the work *Nude, Leaves and Harp* (2012) by Rico Scagliola and Michael Meier, which graces the entrance area to the exhibition in Bern. The artist duo incorporated detailed images of their naked, sculpted bodies into a palm and marble decor on the floor. The path to the exhibition literally leads over their nakedness. Two exhibitions in Austria were also recently dedicated to this new presence of the naked man,¹³ with numerous works documenting "the deconstruction of hegemonic models of masculine look of desire at the male body as well as body cult and exploitation," which is also a focus of the exhibition in Bern.¹⁴ However, while those responsible in Linz and Vienna assumed a distanced, art-historical perspective by taking an iconographic approach based on the selection of motifs or a chronological approach according to epoch, the exhibition in Bern favors a different perspective. It focuses on representations of masculinity in art since the nineteen-sixties while simultaneously taking the historical conditions of being a man into consideration by utilizing central issues in masculinity research as a guide. What thus results is a logical division of the exhibition and this publication into six chapters. The introductory chapter "Strong Weaknesses" revolves around the change in gender virtues and considers this based on the example of the weeping and fearful man. The chapter "Experiments" presents eccentric artistic stagings and sociocritical actions that were influenced by the sexual revolution. The chapter "Emotions" highlights the point in time at which men themselves increasingly cast aside the image of the successful and unflinching hero and explore men's emotionality through doing so. The chapter "Eroticism" describes the change in gaze and position from the male subject to object of desire. The final two chapters "Crisis and Criticism" and "Masculinity as Masquerade," in contrast, are dedicated to a younger generation of artists who deal out criticism of their "fathers" and also discover the arsenal of gender stagings and their utopian potential anew.

¹ *Une riposte aux exagérations, aux absurdités et aux utopies du féminisme* is the subtitle.

² Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter*, 19th ed. (Leipzig and Vienna, 1920), p. 390. Both Weininger's book and Vogt's pamphlet, which saw signs of cultural decay in the women's movement, are considered to be expressions of a growing antifeminism. The often-used term "weak sex" then also provided the title of a theater piece by Edouard Bourdet in 1929, which was even filmed in 1933.

³ "Männer—Das schwache Geschlecht und sein Gehirn: Peter Schipek im Gespräch mit Prof. Dr. Dr. Gerald Hüther," http://www.sinn-stiftung.eu/downloads/interview_maenner_das-schwache-geschlecht.pdf, p. 2 (accessed July 2013).

⁴ Carmen Sadowski, "Der Mann: das schwache Geschlecht," *Express.de*, <http://www.express.de/living/studienbelegen-der-mann---das-schwache-geschlecht,2484,1190404.html> (accessed July 14, 2013).

⁵ Michael Meuser and Sylka Scholz, "Krise oder Strukturwandel hegemonialer Männlichkeit?," in *In der Krise? Männlichkeiten im 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Mechthild Bereswill and Anke Neuber (Münster, 2011), p. 56. See also the text by Michael Meuser in this book.

⁶ *Helden Heute: Das Heldenbild in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*, Centre Pasquart, Biel, 2005.

⁷ Sociologists interpret this as a sign of need in times of social upheaval. See Dolores Denaro, in *Helden Heute: Das Heldenbild in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*, ed. Dolores Denaro, exh. cat. Centre Pasquart (Biel, 2005), p. 20.

⁸ *Oh boy! It's a Girl*, Kunstverein München, 1994; *Féminin—Masculin*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1995; *Rosa für Jungs: Hellblau für Mädchen*, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, 1999; *Das achte Feld*, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2006; to name but a few.

⁹ To date, this has occurred only in smaller exhibition spaces, above all during the nineteen-eighties and nineties, and has remained practically undocumented. An exception in this respect was the exhibition *Women's Images of Men* (1984) at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, organized by Joyce Agee, Catherine Elwes, Jacqueline Morreau, and Pat Whiteread.

¹⁰ Inge Stephan, "Im toten Winkel: Die Neuentdeckung des 'ersten Geschlechts' durch men's studies und Männlichkeitsforschung," in *Männlichkeit als Maskerade: Kulturelle Inszenierungen vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Claudia Benthien and Inge Stephan (Cologne et al., 2003), p. 13.

¹¹ Richard Dyer, "Introduction," in *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, ed. Richard Dyer (London and New York, 1993), p. 4.

¹² Irit Rogoff, "Er selbst: Konfigurationen von Männlichkeit und Autorität in der Deutschen Moderne," in *Blick-Wechsel: Konstruktionen von Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Ines Lindner et al. (Berlin, 1989), p. 141.

¹³ *Nude Men*, Leopold Museum, Vienna, 2012–13; *The Naked Man*, Lentos Museum, Linz, 2012–13.

¹⁴ Barnabàs Bencsik and Stella Rolig, "Vorwort," in *Der nackte Mann: Texte*, exh. cat. Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz and Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art (Budapest, 2012), p. 7.