

## Performer in Actionism? Women Actors in Actionism

Anna Brus and Carola Dertnig in a conversation with Johanna Schwanberg

*Johanna Schwanberg: Anna, you were the most important collaborator in the actions of the Vienna Actionists. You played a decisive role in Schwarzkogler's "Hochzeit" (Wedding), in Otto Mühl's actions ("St. Anna", "Materialaktion no. 26"), and, first and foremost, in actions by your husband – "Ana", "Transfusion" and "Silber" (Silver). However, the role played by the women in these actions has not been a subject of study. Why is this true?*

Anna Brus: I think that for years the artists failed to say that they had worked together with others. If they don't mention their names who should do that? For a long time the texts only spoke about "the model", and "the model" had no name – with the exception of Cibulka, but he was also a photographer and a man. Only later did women, mainly young ones, become interested in the people who associated with the actionists.

*J.S.: The actionists gained international fame with their body pieces. "The models", by contrast, are hardly known. Does this hurt you?*

A.B.: Now not so much anymore. But for a long time it angered me that we were treated like objects in public.

*J.S.: How did it come about that you collaborated in actions?*

A.B.: I was part of my husband's actions from the very beginning – and after the first Brus action "Ana" Rudolf Schwarzkogler wanted me to play the "bride" in the "Wedding"<sup>1</sup> action. This may have had something to do with the fact that we were very close at least to the extent that this was even possible with Schwarzkogler. He was an extremely complicated person – but when our daughter Diana was still an infant he visited us almost every day.

*J.S.: To what extent were you included in the planning of the "Wedding" action?*

A.B.: We always discussed the actions beforehand. I knew exactly how it was going to unfold. I knew about the podium in the corner where the head was to come out and that I was supposed to put the sponge soaked with blue paint in my mouth. And I also knew about the fish action that was going precede it.<sup>2</sup>

*J.S.: Did you also give some input or did Schwarzkogler tell you exactly what he wanted from you?*

A.B.: I don't think that I added any great changes to the concept. I only would have protested if something had been dangerous for me.

*J.S.: And who sewed the "bride's gown"?*

A.B.: I made it myself by tearing a sheet and wrapping it around my body. The only thing that was bought was the veil.

*J.S.: The 1960's were known for being very prudish in Vienna. How difficult was it to overcome all inhibitions about appearing naked in the actions – with mainly male artists and photographers looking on?*

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<sup>1</sup> „Hochzeit“ (Wedding) was Rudolf Schwarzkogler's 1st action. It took place in Heinz Cibulka's apartment on February 6, 1965. Besides Rudolf Schwarzkogler the actors included Anna Brus (as "bride") and Heinz Cibulka. Three photographers were present: Ludwig Hoffenreich, Siegfried Klein (Khasaq) and Walter Kindler.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Brus is referring here to the various sections of the "Hochzeit" action and to the objects involved. The interaction between Rudolf Schwarzkogler and Anna Brus and later also between Schwarzkogler and Heinz Cibulka was preceded by Schwarzkogler handling food (fish, chicken, egg, pear, etc.) and other substances (paint, crystals).

A.B.: You had to overcome your fears to move around as a woman completely naked in many different positions in front of so many people. Often the people standing around would also make some really inappropriate remarks.

*J.S.: What did you get out of taking part in these actions at the time?*

A.B.: It meant a great deal to me since I already knew then that I wanted to break out of this false society – out of this Catholic prudishness. I wanted to be someone who would shout with the entire group to be heard. At that time I couldn't express myself as I would today but I sensed that an outcry was necessary so that something would change in society.

Carola Dertnig: Were you also protesting about the situation of women?

A.B.: For women it was a particularly difficult period – and today I still regret that the women didn't have a voice at the time. They were silent, they sat next to their husbands and would occasionally nod in affirmation or disagree. Only slowly did it become known from France that there were emancipated women there, like Edith Piaf or Simone de Beauvoir. But all of that was very distant for us. At the time, in the sixties, one had the feeling with us that women were hidden beneath an "invisible Burka"! Breaking out of this "burka" was a major goal.

*J.S.: But there were artists like Maria Lassnig or VALIE EXPORT who raised their voices in artistic actions.*

A.B.: Yes, but Maria Lassnig was in Paris and New York and her voice was hardly heard in Austria. When VALIE EXPORT protested by herself it was already the seventies. But I'm talking about the period before that.<sup>3</sup> Only in Berlin did I come into contact with women who had their own opinion and had something to say, especially in socio-political matters. The women there exuded a self-confidence that really amazed us Austrians.<sup>4</sup>

*J.S.: Did you ever consider doing an action yourself?*

A.B.: Alone as a woman? Out of the question! That was completely inconceivable. It also wasn't my goal to develop something myself. I was already spending all my time with four actionists, we spoke about the work and I was fully accepted by the group.

*J.S.: As a group you mean the four actionists, that is Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and yourself?*

A.B.: Heinz Cibulka and Kurt Kren also belonged to it. They were present at a number of discussions that took place before the actions.

*J.S.: The actionists were more different in their work than is often perceived in the reception. Did the artists differ strongly in their dealings with the women who took part in the actions?*

A.B.: Schwarzkogler showed incredible empathy and care. He really took care not to hurt anyone. This even inhibited him sometimes. Mühl could be very exciting. He was the most temperamental of them all. It was also lots of fun with him. When it got to be too rough we would tell him to stop.

*J.S.: And where was your pain limit?*

A.B.: In "St. Anna" (Mühl) I was supposed to be hanging upside down. At that point I said "I'm not doing that". I also interrupted one of my husband's actions – "Strangulation" – since I couldn't bear seeing blood flowing Günter's open eyes.

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<sup>3</sup> Between 1961 and 1968 Maria Lassnig lived mainly in Paris. In 1968 she moved to New York and returned to Vienna in 1980. VALIE EXPORT's first actions in public space took place 1968/69: "Touch Cinema" (Tapp- und Tastkino), 1968, "From The Portfolio of Doggedness" (Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit), with Peter Weibel, 1968; "Genital Panic" (Aktionshose: Genitalpanik), 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Anna and Günter Brus fled to Berlin in 1969 since Günter Brus had been sentenced to six months in prison after the "Art and Revolution" (1968) action. In 1980 they returned to Austria after Federal President Kirchschräger had commuted the imprisonment to a fine.

*J.S.: At the time you made money for the two of you by sewing. How could you link everyday life with the actions.*

A.B.: In those days I hardly got any sleep. During the day I first worked as a seamstress at a factory. At night we discussed and on my days off I took part in the actions. Over time the companies I worked for got better and at the end I worked for the lingerie department of Bengel on Mariahilferstrasse. There I also had colleagues with whom I could talk about action art.

*J.S.: Carola, in "Lora Sana" you dealt with women who took part in Vienna Actionism. What brought you to this subject?*

C.D.: I grew up in Vienna and to a certain extent within the art scene. I absorbed a lot of the atmosphere. I can also remember stories of women who suffered from not getting enough recognition. The second thing is that after spending a long time abroad I began teaching performance history at the Academy of Fine Arts and thus studied this subject in an in-depth way. Together with Stefanie Seibold I curated two exhibitions<sup>5</sup> for which we tracked down a number of performance artists from the actionist days like Erika Mis-Swoboda or "Struppi" (Gerhard Stecharnig) who has disappeared since 1986. In the photographs of actions I had already for some time been interested in the composition of the pictures and began thinking what not just Schwarzkogler but also Anni Brus had done, for instance, in the "Wedding" action.

*J.S.: In "Lora Sana" you added something alienating to the legendary action photographs, drawing over them and by doing so sort of obscuring the male actors.*

C.D.: I see things differently. By overdrawing the photographs, the gesture, the signature becomes an action in the picture. You can also see something familiar shimmer through the overdrawings. I was simply interested in allowing a different perspective through a different form.

*J.S.: Did you try to approach the body work of the actionists by means of this reworking?*

C.D.: It was in a sense a minimal, performative intervention. However, for me it was important that it is ultimately a photograph again and that the process does not just end with the manual reworking. This way the work documents a further action.

*J.S.: That is to say, you are interested in a multiple medial transformation and an approach that is, in a certain sense, historical and documentary.*

C.D.: Exactly. I start with the photographs and not with the actions. I think to myself that one could also look at this from a different angle.

A.B.: Of course. You don't just look at a photograph from the perspective of the photographer at the time.

*J.S.: Anna, what do you say about the work of contemporary artists such as Carola Dertnig? Do you think they can contribute drawing attention to the role of the collaborating women or do you once again feel misunderstood in "Lora Sana"?*

A.B.: I think it's great that this form of reworking is done for completely new things emerge. The new way of thinking is also important. Suddenly the actionists are in the background after having always been on center stage until today. Now the situation is reversed for a short time. I find that great. But what men say about this I do not know.

*J.S.: Carola, beside G.R.A.M.<sup>6</sup>, you are one of the few artists in Austria who reflect on the pictures of Vienna Actionism, even though this art movement is presently being seen internationally as Austria's most significant contribution to art*

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<sup>5</sup> "Let's twist again", 2002, Kunsthalle Exnergasse and "Mothers of invention – where is performance coming from", 2003, MUMOK Factory, Vienna.

<sup>6</sup> Günther Holler-Schuster, Roland Walter, Armin Ranner and Martin Behr.

*developments since 1945. Local performance artists have often sought to delineate themselves from actionism. How do you explain this?*

C.D.: I believe that Vienna Actionism always played an important role in the performance scene. Performance artists of different generations have referred to it. The demarcation might have something to do with the fact that interesting local performances are often ignored by official art history, even though they were very important for the Viennese art scene. "Lora Sana" is perhaps different in the sense that I have taken direct recourse to the photographic documents.

*J.S.: Anna, most of the actions you took part in happened in the early phase of actionism, between 1964 and 1966, while you were no longer so involved in the later actions. Does this have to do with the development of action art or with an important date in your biography, namely the birth of your daughter Diana?*

A.B.: The birth definitely played a role. A birth means of considerable change in a woman's life – and it is better than any action men succeed in pulling off! But also the way the actions of Brus and of Mühl developed was such that I no longer wanted to take part in them. When the extreme actionism became more pronounced – with self-mutilations and mutilations of others I had enough! I don't like this martyrdom in Catholicism and certainly not in Moslems, so I didn't understand why we should mutilate ourselves and nail ourselves onto the ground. At the time there were also major conflicts between my husband and me.

*J.S.: Carola, "Lora Sana" is manifested in two modes of expression. In a pictorial and a textual way. Why did you select two sign systems? What can you say with a text that you can't say with images, and vice versa?*

C.D.: Text has always been important in my work. I believe that by means of text I am better able to render the conversations – that I conduct in connection with a piece like "Lora Sana" – as well as my memories. I construct a story through text – whether it is accurate or not is something different.

*J.S.: You have deliberately allowed a fictive "model" by the name of "Lora Sana" to speak. Why? Wouldn't it be better to finally call the so-called "models" by their name?*

C.D.: They certainly should be named under the photographs. But I also selected the documentary level since some of the women working with me told me that they did not wish to be publicly named. On the other hand, a different form of reception emerges for the viewer as a result of the fictive level in the text. Through the fictive level something narrative and poetic is added.

*J.S.: Let's speak a bit about the divergence between ephemeral action and the traditional way of documenting them in the action photographs. Anna, do you see the action photographs differently today, now with some historical distance?*

A.B.: When I look at the photographs, I sense today what I also sensed then. In "St. Anna", for instance, I see that I was the one who introduced these sacral gestures. Purity and ascetic aspects were not things Mühl was thinking of but were rather in my and "Zimies's" mind.<sup>7</sup> When I look at that today I think to myself: "That's not at all what Mühl had in mind – great!"

C.D.: That was a small revolution in the photograph?

A.B.: Not just in the photograph, also in the action. For "Zimie" and I liberated ourselves a bit. Mühl let us do what we wanted for a while, then he intervened and then things went flying through the air.

*J.S.: The action photographs only convey certain moments of the action.*

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<sup>7</sup> The action titled "Materialaktion Nr. 27: St. Anna" by Otto Mühl took place at the Perinetkeller in Vienna in March 1966. The performers were Anna Brus and "Zimie". The title refers to Anna Brus who was one of the performers. Ludwig Hoffenreich took photographs.

A.B.: That's why I also think it's great that "Ana" is to be seen in an edition with the Khasaq photographs depicting the way it unfolded.

*J.S.: The "Ana" action in particular, which was photographed by both Khasaq (Siegfried Klein) and Ludwig Hoffenreich, shows how differently an action is conveyed by different photographers.*

A.B.: I find myself again more in the Khasaq photographs than in the Hoffenreich photographs. They render much more and better what actually happened – not just physically but also psychologically.

*J.S.: Did you participate in the selection of the photographs as someone who took part in the actions? Were you allowed to also decide on the sections of the photographs?*

A.B.: I was able to. With Schwarzkogler but of course in particular with Brus I contributed to selecting the sections to some extent. We proceeded very pictorially and spontaneously and often simply took what looked good. Here vanities also played a role.

*J.S.: Both the actionists and the photographers were all men. Can you identify yourself when you look at the pictures with the "male gaze" of the woman's body?*

A.B.: Today this gaze bothers me in some of the photographs. Especially in the Hoffenreich photographs you see the male gaze particularly strongly. In the Brus actions in which things were more ascetic and not so patently erotic as in the Mühl actions, Hoffenreich often bickered and said: "I don't even know what I should photograph there, you don't see anything. Can't you put on oil on Anna?" Khasaq, by contrast, was much better at figuring out what Brus was really after.

*J.S.: Do you see your role differently today when you look at the photographs than you perceived it at the time?*

A.B.: It is fascinating that in retrospect Brus and I view some of the actions quite differently – and often we discuss an action or argue about it, since each of us has a different view of it. This certainly has something to do with my development. If you had asked me thirty years ago, I would have seen many things differently than today. But already then I was someone who always interfered. Even if I couldn't name it I already then had the feeling that a lot has to change. Today I'm much more aware of, and more interested in the situation of women all over the world.

*J.S.: Carola, your work has been positively perceived by the press. Critics, however, could insinuate that you are participating in the non-fame of "models" since success and attention ultimately fall to you and not the women who participated in the actions.*

C.D.: I'm absolutely aware of the fact that this is a delicate issue which I have been groping with. As an artist you keep asking yourself when you're developing something like this whether the involved women actually want to participate in that.

A.B.: I don't see that danger. However, I know from my own experience how sensitive it is to deal with this subject. I have been asked on numerous occasions to tell my story but I have always refused to before this conversation. It is extremely difficult, since it could be painful for some people if I were to tell the whole truth.