



STOR

AUT

**,In some of my dances my feelings were heightened to such extremes that it took effort to hold back screams of pleasure or pain. One day I went but one step further, i no longer controlled the screams, and arrived at sound. An example is Kummerlied (Song of Sorrow), a rhythmic, elementary burst of sound. I gently begin to sob. The sobbing constantly becomes stronger until it culminates in a sorrowful bawling, dropping off and ending in a short, jerking single sob. One day I was no longer satisfied with sound and I arrived at the word. I created the word exactly as I did earlier with movement. Being tense, I stammered to myself certain, non-verbal words. I hung on to the ones that released me and I put them together. My Disease began like this. That already comes very close to drama. But why should dance and drama be so strictly separated? The principle is that the person intending to communicate with his fellow men through sound or movement must do it in whichever way he feels compelled.«**

Excerpt from "Valeska Gert über den Tanz", Kulturwille, Monatsblätter für Kultur der Arbeiterschaft, issue: Arbeiterschaft und Theater. Leipzig, February 1931, issue 2, p. 27 and 28

# STÖRLAUT

Jule Flierl / Valeska Gert

## CONTENTS

### Valeska Gert (1931)

About Dance

### Interview

Jule Flierl & Luise Meier

### Lyrics

Everything has always started

### Essay

vocal dance, feminist practices  
and the female voice

### Scores

Death  
Hysteria  
Disease

### Imprint

This booklet was published in the frame of the performance project STÖRLAUT by Jule Flierl.

Premiere 25th of April 2018  
at La Raffinerie Brussels.

### Idea and concept

Jule Flierl

### Graphic concept and design

Caroline Böttcher

### Typography

Tania Maria Tischmeier

### Editors

Luise Meier, Jule Flierl

### Production

David Eckelmann

### Translation

Lily Matras, Adaline Anobile

### Editorial office

Mars Dietz, Adaline Anobile

### Print

Druckerei H. Heenemann, Berlin

### Edition

1200

### 2018

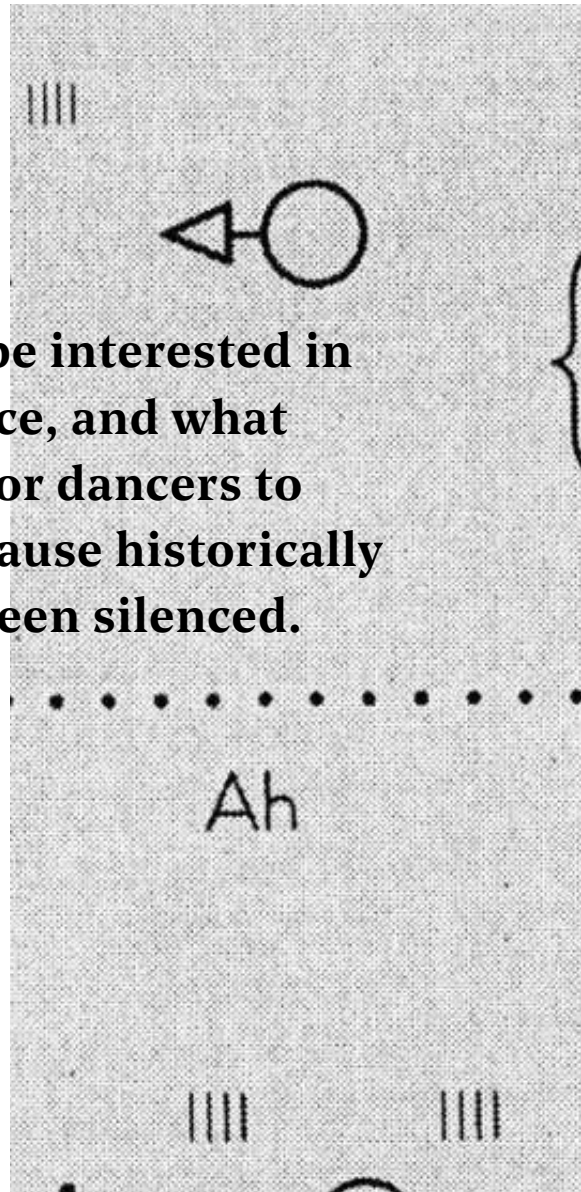
Thanks to Mars Dietz

**LM: Where does your interest to work on VG's Sound Dances come from?**

JF: I have been working on sound dances since at least 2008. I developed them out of an inner necessity, an inner inquiry. Later, I started to be interested in the History of

**Later, I started to be interested in the History of Dance, and what it actually means for dancers to use their voice because historically they have always been silenced.**

Dance, and what it actually means for dancers to use their voice because historically they have always been silenced. A dance historian presented Gert to me as the first dancer who used her voice in Western stage dance. It might not be true, but this was my point of departure. Evoking and working with voices that are not mine already began before STÖRLAUT. In 2017, I created the lecture-performance »I intend to sing«, where I ask questions about my own work on sound dance and also interpret historical sound dances: »Throat Dance« by Simone Forti, Valeska Gert's »Song of Sorrow« and Myriam Van Imschoot's »Scrambled Speech«. It basically deals with the more recent history of Sound Dance. My interest in learning vocal



dances by other artists continues beyond this performance. At the moment, I am learning »My Dog is my Piano« by Antonia Baehr.

**LM: How would you describe your relationship to Valeska Gert's work?**

JF: The first time I studied her archives, I was really shocked because I felt repulsed by many of her dances. There were also cabaret songs, which were not sound dances but just songs, and I simply didn't like them. I guess it's not the most important thing to like everything you work with. I have a very interesting relationship with the sound dances that I decided to work on, and it's not only admiration. I recognized questions in Gert's work, which I had already been concerned with before I started to deal with History. I had already been physically investigating many practices that are similar to her strategies. And because I live in a different era, these practices brought me somewhere else, for example I was rather imitating machines than a baby. But the strategy of altering the appearance of your body by giving it a certain voice is extremely interesting in terms of overcoming the authentic self, the authentic person that you represent when people look at you and think they know who and what you are. There is something very excessive in Gert's use of the voice and movement. It's very vivid.

**LM: Why did you decide not to make a re-enactment out of the research on Valeska Gert?**

JF: Valeska Gert herself in her writing discourages reenactments. She was totally against re-using historical forms and merely copying them. Also, it's impossible to create a reenactment. Firstly because she is such a character and secondly because the

documents are full of gaps. It's not just impossible, it's simply not interesting. I realized that I am part of the contemporary audience and I need to make it interesting for myself if I am to present it to an audience. These materials are really specific to her era. My task is to make it actual in terms of subject but also in terms of methodology. Because our perceptual habits are completely different, media-wise we are living in a different world. Also, I am simply bored with re-enactments. When I am in the audience I feel it gives authority to the archive over the live moment.

**LM: How does sound dance differ from Cabaret which was very popular in Gert's time? What makes Sound dance interesting to you today?**

JF: She of course performed in the context of Cabaret, but her work differed. In Cabaret, you sing a song and then you have a dance and then you recite a text. Instead, Gert was vocalizing *while dancing*. But the context of Cabaret made it possible for this hybrid form – which she invented – to take place. After realizing this, I became quite obsessed with trying to understand Gert. Even more so when I studied the archives and found out that she wrote manifestos about Sound Dance. This is when I realized that she was in fact inventing a conceptual expansion of the notion of dance. It really captured my interest as a subject to work with. She didn't come up with sound dances by accident. Using voice was a well thought-out step in her artistic machinery.

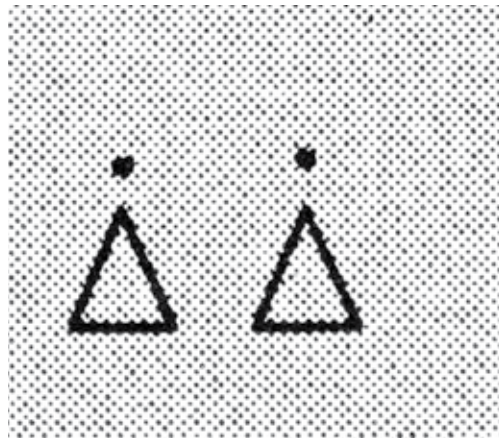
**LM: So she did not work with words or language?**

JF: She also worked with language but the way she came to language was not by writing a text and then interpreting it, but by practicing articulations, a certain physical and emotional state and from this she came to words. In the first phase of this process, there is no meaning. The first phase is a physical practice and out of the physical practice arrives a word but the meaning is secondary. I think this is a big achievement for poetry as well. It feeds into poetry, but I think that her way of working is deeply rooted in her dance practice. Through theatrical conventions we always know what a song is, what a dance is and we know what it is when someone speaks a text. Valeska Gert on the other hand made this into an act of translation. When she asks why shouldn't the voice also be able to dance, it is more than a poetic twist. It means to actually practice something that goes beyond language and beyond singing, to really think about the movements of the voice and their resonance in the body as dance.

**LM: What's your own Sound dance practice? How does your vocal technique correspond with Valeska Gert's sound dances?**

JF: If I think of the voice only from a dance perspective, the first thing that happens is that you try to produce it in synchronicity so that movement and voice are the same, which is what Valeska Gert talks about as well. Then you begin to work with a lot of pressure and use the larynx like a valve, creating a dynamic between the tension and release of the muscular systems. It can be very animalistic and very emotional.

It expresses pain and emotions very easily, which really opens the body and the voice. When I went deeper into the Lichtenberger Method, which is a somatic voice technique I have been practicing since I am nineteen, I started to notice an intense difference between voice and movement – the extreme tension between how the voice is working and how movement is working. It remains a big question for me: how can voice and movement come together without losing their respective qualities? Now, I am also working with dissociation, having realized that physical movement is a dramatically different medium than voice. Of course they have similarities and they constantly intersect, but if I really concentrate on working with the voice, its fleeting energy and minimal soft tissue vibration function well with the parasympathetic nervous system. Movement seems to depend much more on gravity, while the voice seems to be totally detached from gravity. Movement can therefore be a drastic contrast. At the moment, when I practice I either work with the voice or the movements, and then I mix them and work on dissociation. I realized that I am much more precise if I keep them apart in the beginning and only later bring them together.



**...we know what it is when someone speaks a text. Valeska Gert on the other hand made this into an act of translation. When she asks why shouldn't the voice also be able to dance, it is more than a poetic twist.**

**LM: What kind of feminism or feminist strategies do you see in Valeska Gert's work?**

JF: Reading her books, it seems as if she didn't even consider feminism as an intellectual discourse. But, she produced quite the opposite in relation to the dance scene of her time, where women appeared as soft, light and magical beings and created soft and soothing dances. There is a strong relationship with feminist strategies in Valeska Gert's dances and in her character. She was a very uncanny female figure even for her time. The figure she performed had a huge seductive quality that did not rely on sweetness but was actually fighting against this bourgeois image of female sweetness, which was a central figure in the imagery of the popular dance world. She dealt with female sexuality, female out-

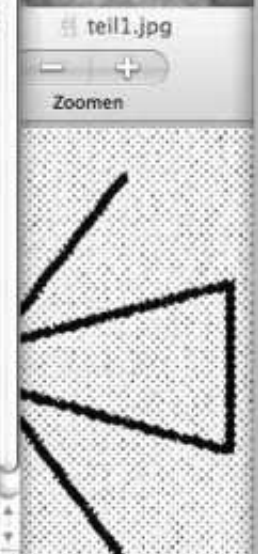
casts and by using her voice, she actually gave another materiality to a body that should only have been looked at. Women are still expected to define themselves by their looks. By giving a voice to the female body that didn't only interpret a song and didn't only recite a text, but that uttered sounds that are similar to digestive or sexual sounds, close to pre-lingual utterances and noises, she created a different and shocking excess to female representation. She broke with the niceness that characterized stage dancing. For instance, on stage you should be silent, you shouldn't speak and you should make as little noise as possible when for example you land after a jump. To this day, this is still a cornerstone of dance technique to create the illusion of a body defying gravity. Gert's use of the voice allows for a physical experience that was not considered



Zitate\_screenshot.indd @ 50 %  
Valeska\_heft17.03.indd @ 74 % [Überdruckenvorschau] Zitate\_screenshot.indd @ 50 %

**Und weil ich den Bürger  
nicht liebte, tanzte ich  
die von ihm Verachte-  
ten, Dirnen, Kupplerin-  
nen, Ausgeglitschte und  
Herabgekommene.**

Vorherige Nächste  
1 Fehler



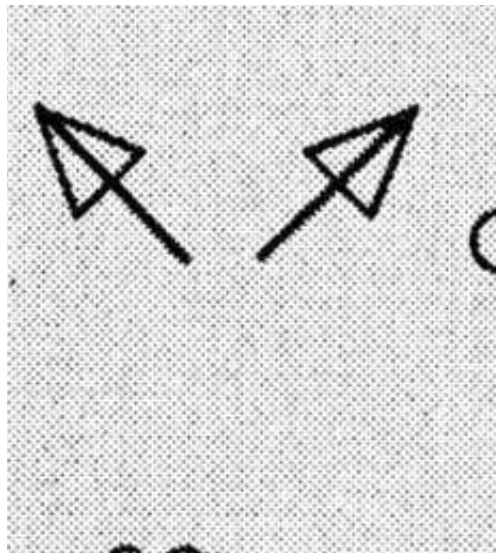
decent or proper. You were not supposed to show pain by screaming or lust by grunting. It is all based on shame. Gert's work shows how much shame and discipline society imposed – and is still imposing today – on the female body. She defied shame. Her performances were absolutely daring and constantly transgressing the boundaries of social acceptability. Valeska Gert was not regarded as beautiful. Especially later, the Nazis vilified her as ugly. On the other hand, if we talk about her relationship to feminism we have to mention that she often appears to be misogynist. In her autobiographical writings she brags only about her relationships with important men like Eisenstein or Brecht. The only times she mentions women is when she is bitching about them. There is some really feminist attitude in the way she approaches female representation using her own body but I would not say that she is an outspoken feminist. Even though she definitely contributed to the feminist discourse.

**LM: How did Gert feel about her contemporary dancers?**

JF: We don't know how Gert actually felt, but we know how she spoke of them in her autobiographies – always in a similar tone, with very repetitive anecdotes. VG spoke of herself as an outcast, especially because it was not nice to watch her dance. It was provocative and either you hated it or you loved it.

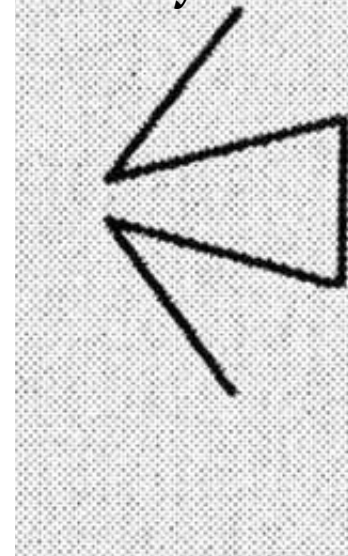
She describes herself as if she were not part of her time. When she talks about her work it seems timeless. The question is how it really was, and it's impossible to know this. Valeska Gert demanded that dancers deal with contemporary issues. You have to be of your time to dance your time.

She basically demands Contemporary Art. She also said Isadora Duncan and Mary Wigman did not dance their time, that they were behind. For Gert, to dance her time meant to deal with technology, film technique and social outcasts, all of which were products of Modern life.



**Gert's work shows how much shame and discipline society imposed –**

**and is still imposing today – on the female body.**



**LM: How important was it for Valeska Gert to produce texts about herself and her work?**

J: When I started to work on her sound dances I soon realized that the autobiographies are in fact connected to her relationship with her voice and her necessity to say what she had to say. She didn't want to be forgotten, and she had a lot to say. Actually, I consider her four autobiographies as part of her sound dances, or at least as part of her vocal practice. Her writings should be considered as part of her practice of being vocal. It was another mode of raising her voice in public. She had to

emigrate because of the Nazis, and at the same time she saw colleagues like Mary Wigman continuing their careers, while she experienced a dramatic rupture in her life. After the war, when she came back to West Germany, she could not build on her pre-war success. The intentions of her writings were very clear and valid. She was in fact rediscovered in the late seventies. This goes to show that she was right in writing her own story and documenting her art. We are only able to relate to her because she made this effort and because people pushed her to write about her life. In the preface of her last book, *Die Katze von Kampen*, she mentions that a guest in her bar, whom she had told about her life, had asked her to write a book about it. So the book is her response to somebody urging her to write down her stories. Her writings also enable me – discovering her generations later – to work with her. She describes in great detail what she is doing with movement. The most detailed descriptions can be found in her autobiographies. She actively created her own legacy from her own point of view. There is no outside gaze.

**LM: How important is the production of additional textual material for you in the context of STÖRLAUT?**

JF: I want to learn about the historical and political context of Valeska Gert's time and I feel that dealing with History helps me to distance myself from things that happen in the present. It helps me formulate a critique. Dealing with History enables me to think beyond issues that are reduced to the Here and Now. It frees my perspective on taste, on conventions, on things that are so normalized that we would not dare to question them. But this project deals with the future,

**She didn't want to be forgotten, and she had a lot to say. Actually, I consider her four autobiographies as part of her sound dances, or at least as part of her vocal practice. Her writings should be considered as part of her practice of being vocal.**

as well. I try to find a non-chronological mode of History – we are all swimming in a pool next to each other, we are all in constant contact with each other. I can give something back to Valeska Gert's work. We are doing this publication now because we did a huge amount of research and theory that goes beyond what the live performance deals with. It's interesting to create this dialog between the theoretical research and the performance.

I also felt that there is a gap or something lacking in the discourse on Valeska Gert's sound dances, and I wanted to contribute something not only to her project of auto-historiography, but also to the discussion of broader questions – What did it mean for women to gain the right to vote? How does this relate to Gert's practice of vocalizing and to female representations in newly emerging talking films? What effect did it produce to be a woman dancer vocalizing weird noises that aren't at all lady-like, and to do this in the context of something called a dance evening that didn't meet the expectations of what a dance evening was supposed to be? – I think this historical research helps me understand better contemporary vocal dance. I find works that deal with History – and STÖRLAUT deals with History – interesting from an ecological perspective. It doesn't try to create something new but is part of a cycle. If I think of History as an ecolog-

ical dynamic, I feel that it is very sustainable to be in a relationship not only with things from the past, but also from the future. And in this work, I am not only connected to VG but I am indirectly connected to other sound dancers, such as Antonia Baehr, LaRibot, Ezster Salomon and even Marlene Monteiro Freitas and Meg Stuart. There is a constant process of relating and creating something out of that. It has to do with digesting and being part of things that go beyond the artist as a genius, such as VG presented herself. I am much more interested in having a hybrid working method or to share work with other dance artists.

**LM: Valeska Gert always stresses that she is a solitary artist in her time. Do you see connections to other artists or art forms?**

JF: That is one of my big questions regarding her as well. She presents herself as being free from outside influences and as the one who gave new impulses to everybody else at that time.

It's very beautiful to encounter an artist who cannot be placed into a certain canon with the authority of an art historian. But, at the same time, my project seeks to produce a canon for Sound Dance and to have her as a fictional godmother of it all. This is a fiction because of course there must have been other people who did sound dances and who aren't at all documented. I create a family, a kind of *Wahlverwandtschaft* with her and other sound dancers. Even though it's fictional, it's empowering to relate to other artists. It is not an ultimate group or a community. It's based on affinities.

**LM: What do you think Valeska Gert inspired in people like Nina Hagen or Wolfgang Müller and what made her interesting to them and in their time?**

JF: The total lack of respect and the freedom that she takes in being brutally honest, but at the same time not being honest at all, like a very ambiguous figure. We can see this in Gert's appearance in the German talk show »Je später der Abend...« from the seventies. And the type of woman that she represents is very uncanny, not smooth neither flirty nor sweet. She is very seductive, but she is also very uncanny and slightly monstrous. And I think if we look at the Punk movement, they were altering their appearances and way of life in an uncanny direction in a radical couter-movement to a conservative mode of being. Gert represented this not only in her art but also in her entire life. She was what the German Angst was – and to a certain extent still is – afraid of.

**LM: How do you understand grotesque dance? Do you think it is a strategy that only worked in the 1920s or do you think it is still relevant today?**

JF: My grandmother from Saxony always told me that, when she was a child in Eastern Prussia before the war, she was practicing grotesque dance and that I became a dancer because she passed the talent on to me. I did an interview with her and asked her what kind of grotesque dance she was practicing, and she told me that she was dancing fairies and trolls and other kinds of fairy-tale-like creatures. It sounded pretty horrible and bad but it was the fashion at that time. Valeska Gert describes grotesque dance

as observing reality and then exaggerating that reality and certain characteristics. She was really interested in characters and their experience but she went beyond the visible. She actually went against what we would call authenticity today. It was basically non-authentic dance, which dealt with non-authentic characters. She defines grotesque dance by stating that reality is grotesque – and here I would add experience is grotesque and social dynamics are absolutely grotesque – so that grotesque dance is actually the only way to grasp reality, and the grotesque artist is the only realistic one.

I realized while working on this piece that I come from a dance education that is deeply influenced by Postmodern Dance from the United States. It taught me to practice a neutral body doing actions, the neutral face, letting the body speak and letting the expression rest. I do think that neutrality is a very interesting tool. But it is absolutely the opposite of grotesque dance according to Valeska Gert's definition. And if we think about the political implication of neutrality, it is absolutely ignorant to believe in neutrality as if it were something real. It can be a methodology, perhaps a physical practice, but when it comes to showing a body on stage, the indifferent freedom of a relaxed postmodern body seems an ignorant fiction, while the violence of the world requires emotional responses and produces affective urgency. Working on Valeska Gert's material has really helped me to formulate this critique of the Postmodern Dance dogma. I actually agree with Valeska Gert that reality is grotesque and politics are so grotesque at the moment and in her time politics were hot and violent, stupid and especially grotesque. Reality was actually as exaggerated as its own parody.

are

**She was what  
the German Angst  
was – and to a  
certain extent still  
is – afraid of.**



maybeyes... • Suivre



„Mir scheint fast, dass man zur Zeit die Zwanziger Jahre aus diesem modischen Nostalgiebedürfnis aufgreift. Alles – aber auch alles – aus dieser Zeit wird jetzt über den grünen Klee gelobt, weil die Ideen ausgegangen sind!“

Ohne Fehler



BIOR  
LAUT



# Everything has always started

everything has always started  
everything has always started  
everything has always started  
forgetting forgetting forgetting

bambambambambambambam  
bambambambam  
bambambambambambambtam  
bambambambam  
bambambambambambambam  
bambambambam

Recollect my limbs  
after the crash yesterday  
wrestle with my past  
and then come what may

this is post-history  
I recycle time  
the ruins of tomorrow  
sculpting grime

I am the document  
that I document  
I am my own archive  
I'm never innocent  
I am a document I recommend  
and I've never been innocent

everything has always started  
everything has always started  
everything has always started  
forgetting forgetting forgetting

bambambambambambambam  
bambambambam  
bambambambambambambtam  
bambambambam

We tear down our temples  
and turn around  
future piles up behind us  
in silent sound

We inhabit the symptom,  
truth replaced by opinion  
whats real is transposable  
everything is possible

holding on to things  
these memory chips  
reorganize that store  
the angel sings  
in the apocalypse  
time won't be no more

everything has always started  
forgetting forgetting forgetting

bambambambambambambam  
bambambambam  
bambambambambambambtam  
bambambambam



Essay Luise Meier / Translation Adaline Anobile

# Queen of Scandal

**Valeska Gert's vocal dances, feminist practices and the female voice in the culture and politics of the 1920s**

»And in all the furioso, in all the sparkling ideas, in all the devotion to her temperament, a *gynaecological term* is lurking: forceps delivery. It is her belief that those, who come into this world in a manner as artificial as that, may never be able to navigate this world smoothly, but they must bumble through and bump about.«<sup>1</sup>

## Forceps astrology

The gynaecological term, a »forceps delivery« (Ger. »Zangengeburt«) that Valeska Gert made Hildenbrandt inscribe into her origin story paints a poignant picture of her peculiar approach as an avant-gardist of dance and performance. She confronts Hildenbrandt with this self-narration of her own origin story and its fateful impact on her art. Moreover, she shamelessly forces the corporeal materiality of birth on him, thereby rupturing the layers of archaic and romantic notions of femininity and nature that were still dominant in the 1920s. In his book *Die Tänzerin Valeska Gert* published in 1928, Hildenbrandt tries to keep at bay the world that brings images of blood, vulvar, the breakdown of the borders between the body's insides and outside and the invasive technical instrument. He uses the term »gynaecological term« for distancing and immunizes himself by ascribing the belief in this origin

story to Gert alone (»It is her belief [...]«). But still her origin story lurks and lingers. It holds a firm grip on every umbilical cord that feeds Valeska Gert's appearance. A »forceps delivery« is an operation wherein the artificial steel instrument is inserted in a seemingly natural process. An object produced by society functioning under certain modes of

production invades the presumed pre-social state of human nature and contaminates and rips apart the illusionary innocence and purity of origin.

This self initiated story about the origin of Gert's art is significant because it shows an affiliation with topics, phenomena and creatures that live, like she does, in-between and do not care about categories, demarcation lines and barriers between allegedly naturally separated spheres. The breakdown of those barriers, the contamination of seemingly purified spheres, the digging for dirt in the most innocent gardens becomes Gert's passion. Body, nature, society, man, woman, even truth – nothing is safe from her metallic grip. Everything gets pulled under the microscope where its instability and elusiveness are exposed. Gert uses the forceps by which she was delivered as a means of production and approach in her art. Its an instrument that extracts aspects of life from their familiar interpretations and background and makes them part of her artistic laboratory, her experimental reconfigurations. Her fateful history of her delivery by forceps

An object produced by society  
functioning under certain modes  
of production invades the presu-  
med pre-social state of human  
nature and contaminates and rips  
apart the illusionary innocence  
and purity of origin.

always reminds her that she herself is not on the outside of the se experiments. She never positions herself outside the complex configurations of the world – she puts herself in the midst of the mess and pulls the audience in with her. Valeska Gert is a native inhabitant of the laboratory, a producer and product of art and experiment. There is always an understanding that neither the private nor the public person can be cut off from the process. All of her, all aspects of her audience's lives, even the day-to-day phenomena and society's outcasts join her in the production process of experimental effects meant for disruption. This idea of herself being held by forceps, holding her subject matter in the grip of the tool's arms, illustrates a relation to the notion of alienation that transgresses the simple binary opposition of alienation and authenticity/originality. Instead it shows a more complex understanding of alienation, because she does not believe in reviving phantasies of a glorious past in order to counteract alienation but appropriates alienated reality by means of counter-alienation or de-familiarization. The other or alien that hides in the cracks of the sayable and visible becomes a means of production in Valeska Gert's Work and alienates the world from its seeming familiarity and naturalness.



## Laboratory

It is her fateful forceps delivery that makes Gert feel at home when she stumbles into the film studio of Georg Wilhelm Pabst: »The laboratory-like atmosphere and the hyper-bright lights electrified me.«<sup>2</sup> She already anticipates and inhabits the space that Donna Haraway later opens up by inventing

ality, technology, art, science, culture, biology and society. »The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian and completely without innocence«<sup>3</sup>, states Haraway in *A Cyborgs Manifesto*. A creature that seems to spring from the same »retort« where, in Gert's own words, »dance is concocted«<sup>4</sup>. In Gert's dances, these creatures and phenomena of limbo-like interstitial worlds become visible and audible. For creatures like these, the bourgeois mind's never ending hunt for a purified harmonized dream world in which there is no place beyond the clear cut categories becomes life-threatening. In the same way Valeska Gert might have died had there not been technical intervention during birth. Cyborg-like creatures cease to exist when origin stories are only viable if they refer to an illusionary space beyond social bonds, contradictions and apparatuses of artificial, economical, technical, artistic, ideological, media-mediated production. Many of Gert's contemporary dancers provide their audiences with escapist phantasy worlds, which enable them to flee the social realities of their daily lives. But Gert puts exactly these everyday occurrences on stage and dissects, dismembers, collages, stretches and deforms them, in order to bring to bear all their painful, tremendous and incongruous aspects. Where others glide and float over the stage or form archaic ornaments in fluttery dresses, Gert dances a traffic accident. But she goes even further than simply refusing to join in this kind of escapism. Gert practices her critique of it on stage. In her dancing, she brings to light the whole mesh of relations out of which the dancers craving for admiration arises along with the complacency and conventionality of the self-proclaimed modern audience. Gert dances a kind of performative immanent critique, insofar as she not

figures like Cyborg and Onkomouse™. She is already at home in the spaces where forceps swing test tubes around and robot arms create their own offspring in their own stainless steel fingers. The one delivered by forceps knows her siblings: precarious entities roaming the border lands of nature, artifi-



»The first Dancer who expressed his time was I.«

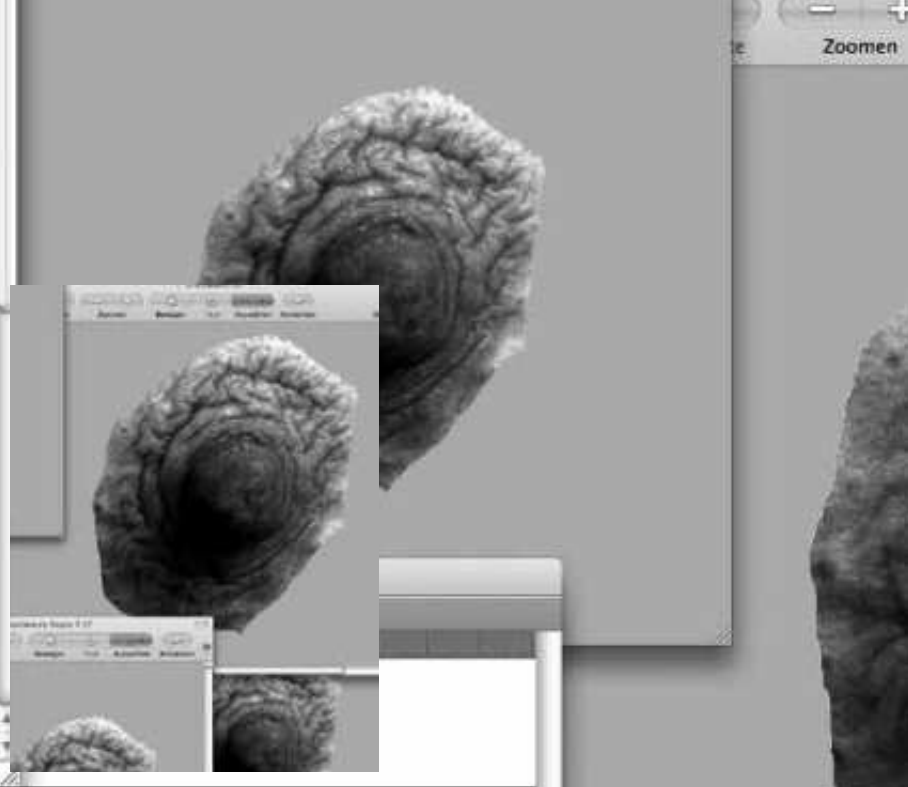
Where others glide and float over the stage or form archaic ornaments in fluttery dresses, Gert dances a traffic accident.

only counters the critiqued aesthetic approach by developing her own (resulting in a individual style or even school), she imitates these questionable artistic and social trends of her time in a manner so detailed that they themselves become a means of unmasking their own illusionism, inherent absurdity and impossibility. It is Eisenstein that gives a striking analysis of Gert's critical practice: »... Absolutely is she nitric acid when it comes to bourgeois ideology. I repeat. She reaches so deep inside, that the ›Spanish dance‹ becomes more than a mere parody on dance. It becomes a sword directed at the heart of all the romanticizing Spain-o-mania.«<sup>5</sup> Her critique does expose the phantasm as such, but asks for its ideological function as well. These questions still move around in the spheres of a forceps delivery. The questions of the image's ideological and cultural functions arise out of the realization that these kinds of images (like Spanishness, death, prostitution etc.) are cultural, technical, artificial and artistic products of contemporary

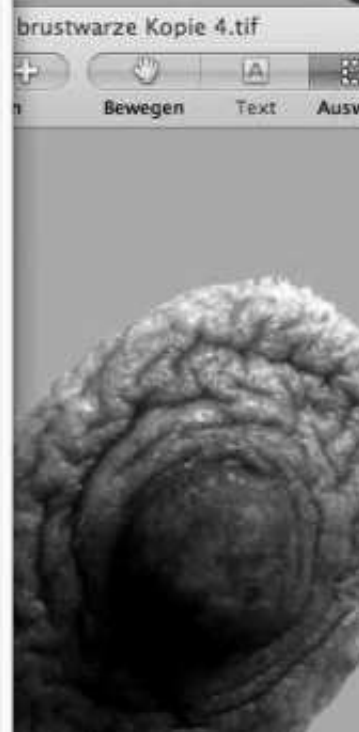
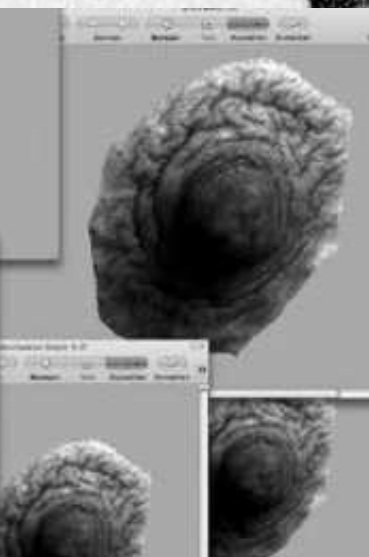
entertainment industry, not the authentic expression originating in some eternal nature (like the Spanish soul).

## Eruption of the Future

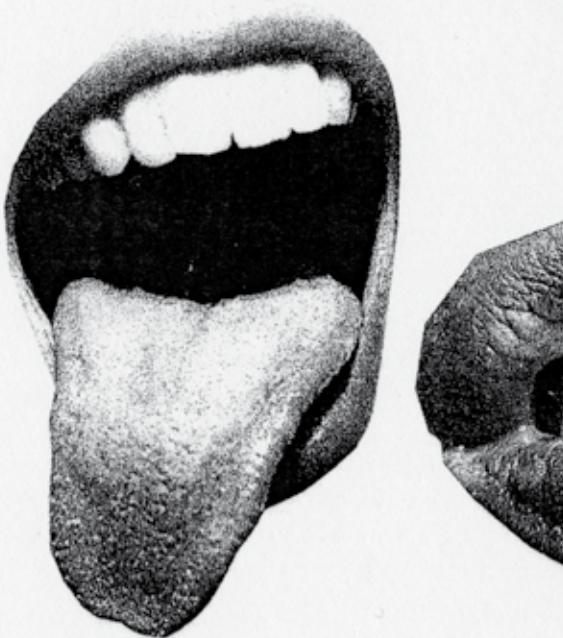
Still, Gert's performative experiments contain a certain utopian element and therein lies a utopian approach to nature, understood not as never-changing essence but as possibility. The potential of human nature is not buried in the past or cemented in the present, but still undecided. It has to be danced, performed, sung, hummed and growled into existence. Even though it will only become visible and audible in a social configuration radically different from society's contemporary state, one can catch glimpses of this potential through an experimental approach, the deconstruction of contemporary illusions, the transgression and smudging of lines. The same can be said about the potential of art.



**„Ich habe ein großes Talent darin die Punkte herauszufinden die Menschen dann ärgern. Ich bin eine geborene Schocköse, eigentlich unerhört modern“**



Every symbolism, every backward classicism, every historicism, every servility towards the latest trends amounts to consent to the status quo not only of society but also of the current state of art. Gert measures the extent to which there is significant novelty created in an experiment on the basis of its effect on the participants, especially the audience. The utopian capacities of the material are decided by the impact it has on the audience. If there is a certain amount of shock in the eyes of the audience signalling a break with common sense, if there are signs of misunderstanding, upheaval, furor, even police intervention, then there is a flash of possibility, a glimpse of novelty. Pleasure, as well is an indicator: laughter, ecstasy, lust. Valeska Gert finds the new language of dance in those moments in which she manages to untangle herself as well as the audience from the deadlock of commonality, conventionality, the continuous repetition of the same. The new only comes into existence in contrast to the familiar, commonsensical, normal, feasible, or expected. This contrast can be achieved by activating elements of dissonance, contradiction, disruptiveness, perversity, disgust that already exist opposite but also right in at the centre of bourgeois society. Gerts dances show the familiarity of society's outcasts and the perversity of socially acceptable habits; editing, denaturing and disassociating elements of opposed categories until they become indistinguishable and turn into evidence of the inherent instability of the categories themselves. But even the most shocking performances become known and commonplace, or initiate a new trend making them less effective when it comes to counteracting the establishment. The danger of being co-opted by the mainstream concerns Valeska Gert as one of the main aesthetic questions. Art, as she understands and prac-



**The new only comes into existence in contrast to the familiar, commonsensical, normal, feasible, or expected. This contrast can be achieved by activating elements of dissonance, contradiction, disruptiveness, perversity, disgust that already exist opposite but also right in at the centre of bourgeois society.**

tices it, loses its effectiveness as within the canon. As a creature of scandal, Gert moves on to continue her search for constellations that force a break in viewing habits and established expectations.

## Vocal Dance

The invention of vocal dance in the mid 1920's freed Gert out of an artistic deadlock. Voice becomes another link in the constellation. The voice appears as an additional fragment thrown in with the fragmented face, body and movements in order to create a disharmonious formation challenging its surroundings. One more instrument to be manipulated and repurposed to evoke pleasure/irritation/scandal. Her vocal dances are shocking because of their polyphonic character, which questions the unity of body, narration and the story itself. The voices she raises within her performances evade intellectual interpretation as well as unproblematic consumption. They remain incommensurable.

Being a woman, Gert's aesthetic strategy creates dissonance relating to the image of women as complacent spectacles and projection screens ready to reassure the male gaze. She establishes a stance and viewpoint in the discourse concerning the present state of the world. This position, from the outset, claims its place on the same level as the male voices in contemporary discourse. The queen of shock's weapon of choice is the intensity she elicits from her effect machine comprising audience, bodies, sound, stage, costume, stoppage and movement. Her intensity and affectivity makes it impossible to deny Gert's agency. Gert's performative strategies of fragmentation as well as her numerous publications self-narrating and self-in-

terpreting her practices (in autobiographical books, articles on the theory of dance etc.) repel any image of female passivity. She is not the object of choreographers or trainers nor is she herself the all-mighty subject texting or choreographing the movements of others. Neither grace, nor humility, nor tranquillity, nor elegance, nor innocence can be attributed to her performances. Especially her performance of the female pleasure and orgasm (that according to Tucholsky can be found not only in the explicit piece *Canaille* but others as well) contradicts aggressively and without compromise the idea of the woman as being sexually deficient or passive with her purpose lying in gratification of men, portraying innocence and reproduction. Valeska Gert subverts the imaginary gender binary when she becomes a boxer or a politician on stage enacting a whole political gathering. She does not, however simply counteract the binary by putting on masculine clothing. She mimics the insignia and habitus of femininity and masculinity in such a precise manner that she exposes them as practices and trappings rather than biologically guaranteed attributes of bodies categorized as either male or female. No wonder that the voice as well is used as a subversive element to further unsettle the order of things instead of producing synchronicity or harmony.

## We do it with brazenness!

Berlin in the 1920s sets a stage already inhabited by various types of the ›New Women‹. Women are part of the workforce, contribute to politics and are much more visible on the streets, in the pulsing Berlin nightlife and in

the media than in the Wilhelminian era. The emerging ›girl culture‹<sup>6</sup> utilizes a performative strategy of appropriation. They transgress the limits of traditional women's roles on all sides. They appropriate elements of prostitution, men's fashion, military, sports and the world of technology. Often a hint of irony is added. These male symbols of power are not only empowering the women wearing them but at the same time the potency of the symbols is itself undercut and mocked by this practice. The liberation that these forms of appropriation enabled, is often criticized for only being a hedonist manifestation of consumerist culture or a vain amusement of the privileged. The official story is that feminism stems from the traditional bourgeois women's movement, which accomplished what they fought for: the right for women to vote. On the other hand there are these ›Girls‹ which were without any political agenda and impact. Whereas the organized bourgeois women's movement is celebrated for achieving women's voting rights, the ›girl culture‹ is seen as futile, mainly because they could not prevent the Nazi's rise to power.

This simplified black and white representation of German history is misleading. It seems however interesting to take a deeper look at these charges of hedonism, selfishness and lack of political purpose with regards to the underlying concept of women.

**The post World War I era  
is a time of monetary as  
well as moral inflation.**

The generation of the bourgeois women's movement before Valeska had previously demonstrated their political conviction, willingness to sacrifice themselves and selflessness by absolutely devoting themselves to their nation and its warmongering preparing World War I. They saw a ›higher meaning‹ being realized in this war. The BDF (Bund deutscher Frauenvereine/Federation of German Women's Associations) called upon German women to make themselves essential to the war effort by setting up the ›Nationaler Frauendienst‹ (National Women's Service) which tied the idea of women's right to work to care work on human war material. Furthermore, they surrendered the fight for women's rights to vote to the national interests of the German Empire. Who then can be credited with achieving women's right to vote in Germany if not ›the women's movement‹? Organized women in the German empire as well as in the Weimar Republic were highly divided along class lines. Women's right to vote was mainly a result of the November Revolution of 1918/1919 in which the proletarian women's movement played a significant role. With that same revolution the votes were counted according to the principle of »one man one vote« instead of the Prussian three-class franchise system, which counted the weight of the vote depending on the voter's tax revenue. It's absurd, but prior to the November Revolution, the bourgeois women's movement actually discussed the question of fighting for women's voting rights within the bounds of the three-class franchise system. The majority of women would have been no longer excluded from voting along gender but along class lines. Following that history, it is not surprising that the organized bourgeois women's movement (especially the BDF) grew more and more conservative and nationalistic,

**The emerging 'girl culture' utilizes  
a performative strategy of appropriation.  
They transgress the limits  
of traditional women's roles on all  
sides.**

coming into conflict with the interest of the younger more rebellious ›Girls‹. This discrepancy also becomes apparent in regard to § 218, the law that penalized abortion and was fiercely debated during the Weimar Republic. While many movies, doctors, artists and the proletarian women's movement fought for the abolition of § 218, the BDF rejected its abolition until the Nazis seized power and the BDF itself was dissolved. The fight against § 218 coincides with strategies of cross dressing, playful handling of homosexuality and prostitution in fashion and entertainment culture that contributed to increasing the public acceptance of groups who had been excluded, scorned and criminalized before.

Flappers put up performative resistance against the dominant image of women in their everyday practice, whereas the organized bourgeois women's movement followed a pattern of representative politics. It is this strategy of representation that propelled them, for fear of decline in membership and therefore loss of power and legitimacy, to become increasingly reactionary. Thus in 1920, the well connected long time member Alice Salomon was denied the previously promised presidency of the BDF for fear of anti-Semitic tendencies among the general public as well as the BDF membership, because she was Jewish. The search for unity

and commonality among women, which the BDF claimed to represent, resulted in the preservation of a rigid image of women, conceived as motherly and exclusive of troublesome women and interests. To some extent the function of the BDF was less the representation of the supposed common interests of women as it was the effective organization and disciplining of women in the name of nation and tradition. To this day it is a strange contradiction that the white bourgeois women's movement for a public voice and rights equal to those of men is taken for a claim to represent all women and speak for all through one voice. Again and again the attempt is being made to define what



The voices of these girls derive their legitimacy not from representing higher values but from an attitude of unmasking, audacity, hedonism and pragmatism.

»The Woman« is and what her interests are and to place that definition at the heart of the argument. This idealization, limitation and exclusion must have seemed ludicrous, impractical and senseless in the German post-war era, in which the male counterpart of this gender binary can no longer hide its fragility behind rhetorics of war and heroism. The deconstruction of masculinity manifests all over: Male bodies mutilated by war machinery, the inflation of dead sons, fathers, husbands (all the more shocking since the real numbers were not released until the war was lost), the great emperor escapes in shame instead of facing defeat and the revolutionary masses. The post World War I era is a time of monetary as well as moral inflation. The images of piles of cash burned as heating material, because their value in use surpasses their financial value, are impressive. A similar inflation hit many of the other metaphysically charged values of the German Empire: god,

death, nation, motherhood, chastity, heroism, spirituality and the purity of love; all those higher ideas implode in the light of daily hardships and the inhumanity of war. Sex, work, entertainment, every aspect of life can no longer derive their legitimacy from a higher meaning, but has to prove their direct practical usefulness and enjoyability. In this age of ultra-pragmatism, prostitution, as a source of income, previously known only to the working-class milieu, reached the middle class and the bourgeoisie due to increasing poverty. It »lost its previous meaning, when tens of thousands got caught up in sexual relationships that were all commercial in nature.«<sup>7</sup> Especially in Berlin, Valeska Gert's foremost playground, contradictions between pre-war morals and post-war reality were laid bare. Berlin's vice officers tried controlling Berlin nightlife and the raging dancing mania in particular, by steering it towards puritan amusement. But this city that became a melting pot of people from the countryside searching for work and freedom, became the experimental playground for the art avant-garde from all over the world, the stage of political power struggles, black market and a magnet for excess and sex tourism; in short, it became unmanageable. Berlin also became the center of a more politicized and confident gay liberation movement thanks to renowned activist and scientist Magnus Hirschfeld. This movement not only created a multitude of establishments specialized in the different preferences of their customers, but also engages in sex education films, scientific research, awareness campaigns, political agitation and the publication of magazines. And finally this city, with its huge supply of office jobs, made 'girl culture' possible. These jobs offered them relative financial independence which they enacted as much as possible. These new women, hungry

in every sense of the word, toyed with the smudging of the lines between the daughter of a respected family and the prostitute, leaving it to speculation which hunger was driving them. The voices of these girls derive their legitimacy not from representing higher values but from an attitude of unmasking, audacity, hedonism and pragmatism. It is private pleasure and necessity that propels them to slowly infiltrate and undermine the public sphere, questioning previous divisions of private and public by pushing the envelope of privacy and femininity itself. »We are the new spirit, we do it with brazenness!« states a line from a Berlin pop-hit from 1928.

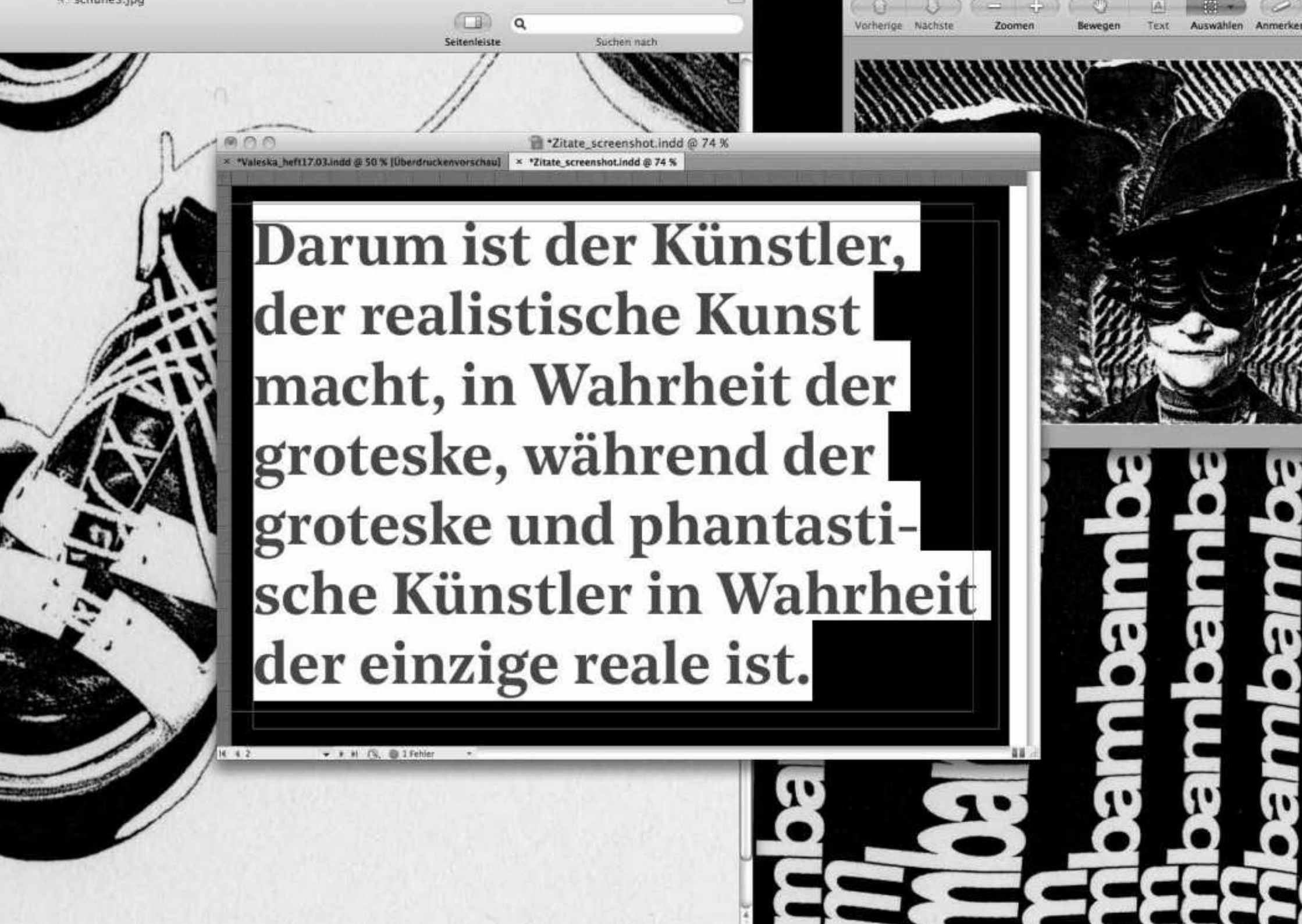
## Alienation and Appropriation

The main issue that separates the proletarian women's movement from the organized bourgeois women's movement was their relation to alienation. Whilst the bourgeois women had problems thinking the interests of women beyond the biologist and nostalgic image of women, the »girl culture« as well as the proletarian women embraced the the profound social and technical transformation that were brought about by the beginning of industrialization. In her speech on the liberation of women at the International Workers Congresses of Paris in 1889, Clara Zetkin, a leading figure of the proletarian women's movement, stated: »The question of women's emancipation is a child of the modern era, to which had been given birth to by the machine.«<sup>8</sup> The emancipation of women is, by virtue of its machination, a forceps delivery. On the assembly line, at the typewriter, and at the switchboard: women become cyborgs. This is an aspect of industrialization that the



dominance of the white bourgeois women's movement tends to obscure, simply because the experiences of upper class women did not represent the experiences of other women working in factories, suffering poverty and miserable working and living conditions but at the same time experiencing fragments of autonomy in that same suffering. With the rise of mechanization, women's labour (becoming wage labour) shifted from the private into the public sphere, which entailed the dissolution of traditional social relationships and gender roles. Even though the proletarian women's movement fought to overcome capitalism and with it the misery and exploitation of workers, they recognized the emancipatory potential inherent in cap-





**Darum ist der Künstler,  
der realistische Kunst  
macht, in Wahrheit der  
groteske, während der  
groteske und phantasti-  
sche Künstler in Wahrheit  
der einzige reale ist.**

italism's destructive force. Therefore their demand for liberation went beyond the bourgeois nostalgia for machine wrecking and the paradigm of state welfare following the pattern of social policy implemented by Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck in the 1880s. They did not just want to roll back capitalism or soften its blow, they wanted to go beyond it. Their most important performative weapon was the labour strike.

A strike is a weapon that is not only defined by the obvious ends it achieves, but by the transformation it develops among the participants. Strikes make tangible the collective power of wage workers but when it comes to women workers it also makes visible their equality within the fight. To working class women, women's liberation could only mean the liberation of all workers at the same time, otherwise these women would just shift from being dominated by the working class man to being dominated by the factory owner. Although the bourgeois women's movement did broach the issue of working-class poverty and suffering, they limited their solutions to a politics of charity, welfare and social work, whilst the working class women sought equality with men in the strategies and means of the fight: self-empowerment by use of unionization and strike. Alienation is not overcome by regressively returning to some imagined original female essence, but rather by appropriating the means of production, which starts with the overall of the male worker and his connection to machinery, the occupation of the factory, and ends with general strike and finally revolution. These methods also signify a corporeal experience, the successful breaking of police lines, the disruption of the workflow, defending occupied headquarters and the raising of a voice that has influence in political discourse. These methods are meant to forge a revolutionary

**Alienation is not overcome by regressively returning to some imagined original female essence, but rather by appropriating the means of production, which starts with the overall of the male worker and his connection to machinery, the occupation of the factory, and ends with general strike and finally revolution.**

subject, not, as often misunderstood by the left, to serve any supposedly already existing masculine, white, romanticized and heterosexual ideal of »The Worker«.

It was never certain that an image of women as progressive as that would prevail among the workers movement. Many male workers blamed women working for declining wages and unemployment. They saw women more as illegitimate competitors than as comrades-in-arms. And it was due to the convincing agitation of loud and brilliant women like Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg (leaders of the revolutionary Marxist wing within the Socialist Democratic Party) that the final rallying cry was not »women back to the kitchen!«, but »equal pay for equal work!«. Their agitations were not only effective because of their content, but because of the performative affect as well. The simple act of standing on the podium rendered their very bodies as a claim for workers rights. Their arguments not only proved the malignancy of capitalism but were evidence to the intellectual equality of women.

The last two writings that Rosa Luxemburg published in »Die Rote Fahne« (The Red

Flag) during the violent repression of the November Revolution, convey how much she and Valeska Gert share this passion for what Susanne Foellmer calls »the fanaticism of unmasking.«<sup>9</sup> Luxemburg revealed the bloody enforcement of reactionary interests behind the lie that the government and the Berlin press called »quiet and order«. She exposed how the government utilized the disappointment and disbelief over the military impotence towards the foreign enemy by redirecting it towards the domestic enemy. The government offered the bloody suppression of the opposition as compensation, a means to restore masculinity. Luxemburg already sensed that she too would be among these offerings upon which the new »law and order« rested, which would have to serve as domestic enemy and penile prosthesis for disillusioned Freicorps officers. She ended up a corpse, silenced and disappeared, floating in the Landwehrkanal in Berlin, after the suppressed November Revolution achieved women's right to vote, and merely four days before she herself could have executed that right. It was the organized silencing of a disorderly voice that would not have been silenced by a vote cast once every four years.

## Störlaute/Sound Interference

The voice Valeska Gert introduces into her performative experiments is similarly disorderly. She questions the rational subject as origin of voice and detaches the voice from the body as the biological guarantor of its place in the order of things. Gert's insertion of voice and body on stage does problematize nature in a significantly different way. Rather than being a reference for nostalgia

or escapism, nature becomes a source of disturbance that lies beyond any representation or reassurance of order. Contrary to the mute genre of ballet that rid itself of body sounds through disciplining in order to represent with its ethereal impression the illusion of an otherworldly meaning, Valeska Gert dances, mimes and wheezes the boundaries, pains and desires of the disciplining process and its secretions. Gert does not lock away the uncertainty of contradictions inside images of exotic figures that culture manufactures for distancing. Instead she reaches down from the stage out of the windows directly into the muddy day-to-day life



of her audience and innocent bystanders. Her voices refuse to explain the despicable or to integrate cultural discontent into neatly woven coherent worldviews.

Gert is sworn to disruption. This is why she even loathes success – which is still the final objective of radical sexual reform advocates, artists, the women's movement and expo-

»The bourgeois is a ghost: he floats through the air with almost no ground under him.«

nents of girl culture. In the end, the main objective is always political, commercial, justiciable or scientific success and social recognition. Striving for success and public approval under the status quo implies a certain degree of compliance with its very conditions. Gert is very aware of this ambivalence. She conceptualizes the process of art not as the production of lasting artworks that struggle for their place within dominant culture, but as instruments and weapons constructed provisionally in a certain moment to counter a certain moment in the current state of society.

In her very first appearance Gert positioned herself as a disruptive element bursting into an otherwise pleasant and charming evening program. »As soon as I exploded on to the stage, I became exuberant and filled with the impulse to shake up the audience that I bursted like a bomb into this atmosphere of loveliness created by the others.«<sup>10</sup> Bursting, exploding, shooting, these new types of artists know that the »transvaluation of values«, as Nietzsche put it, requires art to attack traditional values and expose their obsolescence and hypocrisy before any new values can be created. In her eighties, Gert states in a television interview: »I always quit as soon as I reached success.« Valeska Gert had an extraordinarily productive relationship to misunderstanding, displeasure, failure, mishaps and disagreement. This relationship constitutes one of the essential aspects of her artistry which seems to be more related to martial arts than to art in the sense of theater and museum. This characteristic becomes tangible in Gert's creation of the New York »Beggar Bar« and the »Ziegenstall« in Kampen, bars in which she experimented with the transition from stage spectacle to bar fight. The fact that she opened bars instead of schools further illustrates which kind

of artistic approach she deemed productive. Mary Wigman designated herself the leader of her work and organized her pupils into supple harmonious choreographies, whereas Gert made contradiction the permanent context of her performances: artist and servant, everyday entertainment and art, fleetingness and lasting impression, need for admiration

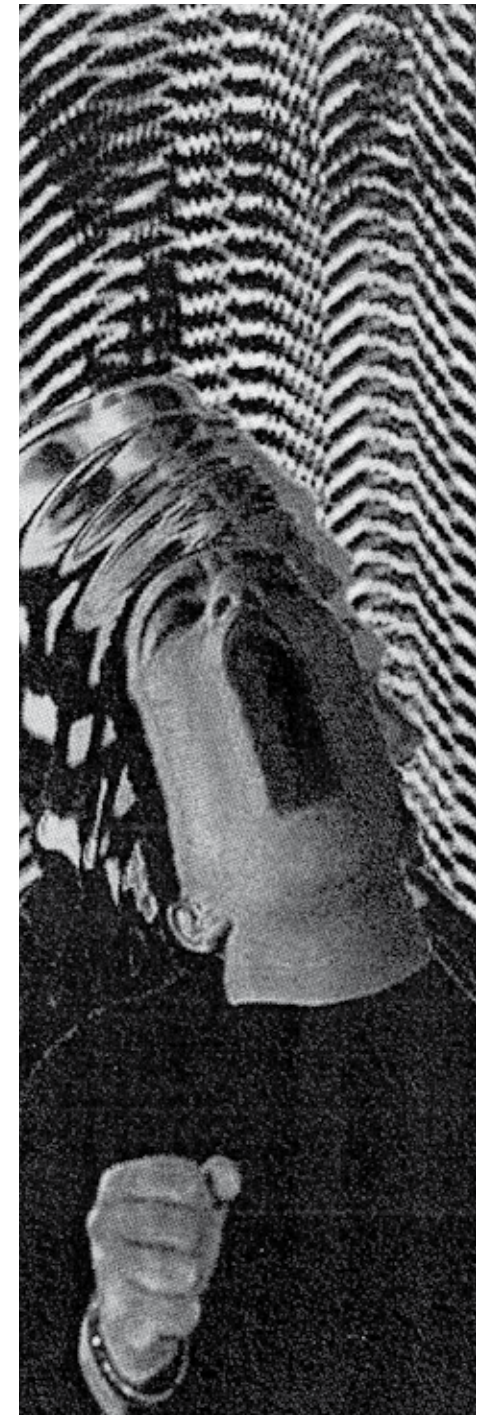
She conceptualizes the process of art not as the production of lasting artworks that struggle for their place within dominant culture, but as instruments and weapons constructed provisionally in a certain moment to counter a certain moment in the current state of society.

and provocation. In Gert's businesses, the stage does not signify any difference between artists and audiences nor the disparity between teachers and pupils. Gert does not wish to teach, lead or explain, she wants to interact with her guests in a shared situation. According to a review in 1949, »She does not dance at all, she was just there. She was creation of chaos«<sup>11</sup>. The prime of Gert's explosive interactions was in the 1920s, a time when the old world had been shaken and was pliant in the hands of those who were ready to completely overturn it. And there were others. Asta Nielsen, one of the first silent film super stars of these times, expressed the new extended possibil-

ities and performed a female Hamlet amid a scenery built from the remains of shot down war planes. Nielsen's Hamlet oscillated between irony and tragic and emerged as polymorphous polyphonic critique of dominating gender stereotypes. Another memory of Asta Nielsen, however, marks the end of this era of rising possibilities: In 1933 at a »tea time« in, honour of film-makers hosted by the ministry of propaganda, Hitler strived to win Nielsen over. He tried to compliment her in saying that he would have to make speeches for hours and still nobody would understand. She on the other hand would only have to make one gesture and the whole world would understand. To which she responded, »You mean this one?« raising one hand to the Hitler salute. This scene exposed both the tragedy and irony of the narrowing of possibilities that was to come. The first international silent movie star praised for her vast gestural vocabulary is offered the restriction to one gesture and invited to join Hitler's enforced conformity (Gleichschaltung), which she declines. But times were not only changing in political terms.

## Obedient Voices in Sound Film

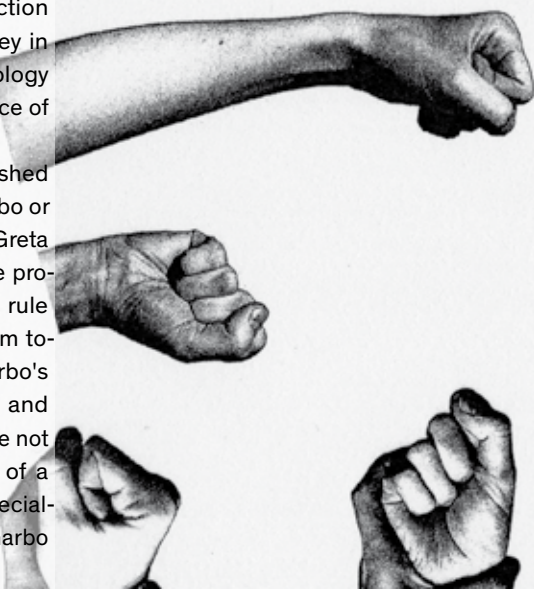
In the 1920s Nielsen owned her own film production company and marketed her own label of cigarettes. She enjoyed great autonomy in choosing her topics and characters. By the time of the 1930s, sound film dominated the international market. This sound film take-over coincided with the re-naturalization and re-nationalization of female movie characters. The dissonance, polyphony and ambivalence of women were disciplined and overcome on screen. The first two



sound films, *Applause* and *The Jazz Singer* deal with the harmonization of social dissonance, set in the United States. In *Applause*, the mother, a fallen woman, guilty of the hubris of believing she could exist without a man, sacrifices herself to allow her daughter the highly moral way of life that she herself refused. In *The Jazz Singer* the audio sequences are limited to the leading man, who is struggling to navigate within American pop-culture mediating the conflict between his Jewish Orthodox origins in and his ambition to become a famous jazz singer. Women are the essential element to this mediation process. His mother as well as his future non-Jewish wife act as bridging figures, who finally submit to the protagonist's decisions. A kind of ›exchange of women‹ takes place, guaranteeing the new social bond. The future wife wholeheartedly listens to the protagonist singing in synagogue, and his mother does the same in his Broadway show. Furthermore, this first popular American sound film uses blackface to construct a shared white American identity among the various European immigrant communities opposite the Black other. The production companies that invested a lot of money in the new expensive sound film technology feared strange voices as well as the voice of the other.

This development even affected established international movie stars like Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich. The studio that had Greta Garbo under contract arranged intense pronunciation training for her, in order to rule out ambiguity. Still there was scepticism towards the apparent strangeness of Garbo's voice. This strangeness was situated and justified by making her first speaking role not just that of a prostitute but also that of a Swede. The contemporary reviews especially stressed that being a Swede herself Garbo

must have been the natural choice for the role, which is why her performance excelled in ›naturalness.« Although her deep voice was criticized for being too manly, it was noted by critics that this was 'befitting' for the role of a prostitute. The fact that actresses like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich were able to prevail in the American film industry is essentially due to the disciplining of their voices and their localization in the sphere of the ›exotic‹/other. Most male heroes would then prove their masculinity by taming and domesticating the ›exotic‹ woman, after having awakened her romantic feelings and made her reconcile with her ›true‹ female nature. Hollywood sound film productions of the 1930s showcased the transformation from androgynous girl to respectable and servile wife. Efforts toward independence were now shown to be futile and presumptuous and would, if not be abandoned for love and a husband, almost always end in tragedy. The audience was not just witnessing the replacement of one image of women with another, it was sharing in the process of transition. There are scenes in the begin-



## The production companies that invested a lot of money in the new expensive sound film technology feared strange voices as well as the voice of the other.

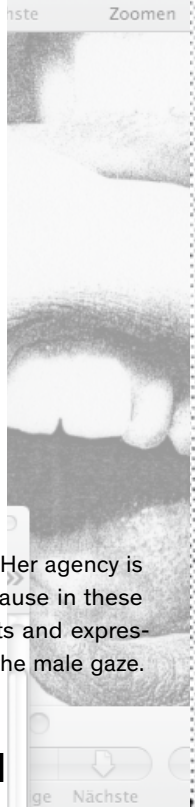
ning of the movie were the ›exotic‹ woman persistently voices her independence, which is already represented as being 'naturally unnatural' by situating those convictions in the milieu of prostitutes or ›exotic‹ Others. Thereafter the storyline sets out to prove her wrong and to undermine the authority of these women's voices. The storyline suggests, that they simply do not know what is best for them. That is what the line ›I want to be alone‹ from *Grand Hotel*, that famously stands for the whole of Garbo's personality, captures: the tragic of the fallen woman, the woman that does not know what she really needs, and the invitation for men to conquer and convert her, or to at least watch her being punished.

The female protagonists of the two first American sound films as well as in the German *Der Blaue Engel* and in Garbo's *Grand Hotel* are also singers or dancers. This is a role that according to cultural scientist Kaja Silverman, redoubles the reification of female voices and bodies.<sup>12</sup> Distance is placed between the audience and the woman not only by the screen but also by the stage shown on the screen. She is objectified twice, once by the spectator in the movie and secondly

by those watching the movie. Her agency is questioned even further, because in these constellations her movements and expressions are choreographed for the male gaze.

## Masculinity and Other Crises

The introduction of sound film coincided with the Great Depression, which influenced its aesthetic as well as the content-related development in many ways. Widespread economic, social and political powerlessness of men intensified the crisis of masculinity. By projecting that growing impotence onto women it was isolated, moved into distance, absorbed by femininity and disarmed. For this transfer to work women had to be shown as impotent and naturally weak and irrational in order to erect male authority and power as her opposition and spectator. But the disempowerment was not limited to the sphere of images, it also manifested on the economic level. In the face of growing unemployment women (especially married women) were forced to leave their jobs which



were then to be given to men. The technological requirements of sound film led to an increase in production costs for the movie industry. This increase in price, in the midst of a financial crisis, resulted in the closing of many studios and the monopolization of the remainder. This increase of competitive pressure significantly reduced diversity and willingness to experiment among the industry and intensified conformity. Growing anti-Semitism and nationalism created the demand for a racially and nationally defined, distinctly gendered identity that had to be visible and audible in order to prove and reinforce its claimed naturalness. Klaus Theweleit in his book ›Männerphantasien‹ (male fantasies) explains the rise of fascism as excesses of the bourgeois male subject trying to assert its individual autonomy against the feeling of being nothing more than one of many mechanically fabrications of modern society or simply a product of circumstance. For this construction of bourgeois male subjectivity to work, it is constitutive to clearly differentiate oneself from the objectified other. If these othered objects however become transgressive and start questioning their own identity it endangers the whole ›natural‹ order of things and therefore the identity of the male subject.

The synchronization of female voice and female body is a central operation that aims to counter those dangers of transgression and perversity. The female voice is not taken by its word but localized it in the female body. Both voice and body are made to represent femininity and conform to the ›natural‹ order. This created an interesting vulnerability — that deconstructing the naturalness of said order can simultaneously deconstruct the dominance and omnipotence of the male gaze. This fragile omnipotence can also be destabilized as soon as female desire devel-

**Furthermore, Gert's orgasm appears as a sudden, autoerotic excess of activity rather than a passive phenomenon that could only be induced by a male sexual partner.**

ops autonomy, as is seen in Valeska Gert's *Canaille*. The performance does not just show a prostitute fake an orgasm, but suddenly lets her actual desire shine through. The portrayed sex worker suddenly shifts from being the object of male desire to being the subject of her own desire. She transforms from being defined by her position within the economy of male desire to defining her own economy of desire within which her male customer is assigned its role. Furthermore, Gert's orgasm appears as a sudden, autoerotic excess of activity rather than a passive phenomenon that could only be induced by a male sexual partner. The transgression of categories intensifies even further when in another one of Gert's performances the desire of an infant and that of its wet nurse are merged into one suck-and-pump-machine as imagined by Deleuze and Guattari, years later. Gert's

performances create polymorphically and polyphonically functioning units that undermine the gender binary as well as rules of individuation.

## Success as Failure

Over the course of her lifetime, Gert impacts the audiences quite differently. The fact that she never aims for success and refuses to conform to dominant opinions and trends makes her a kind of indicator of the tremendous regressions following the 1920s. Gert's performances were unthinkable in Nazi Germany as well as in Stalin's Soviet Union of the late 1930s. The Nazis labeled her »degenerate« not only because she was Jewish, but also because of her aesthetic and political attitude. Even in the US, where she emigrated via Paris and opened the Beggar Bar, and in post-war Germany during the Adenauer era, she encountered problems. Contrary to the fun scandals and police interventions of the 1920's, these problems

**The Nazis labeled her "degenerate" not only because she was Jewish, but also because of her aesthetic and political attitude.**

were really counterproductive because they were bureaucratic and financial in nature. In contrast to Leni Riefenstahl and Mary Wigman, whose ›racial nature‹ as well as aesthetics were much more consistent with the Nazi's cultural policy and who were choreographing or filming parts of the 1936 Olympics, which overall promoted enormously fascist and nationalist aesthetics, Gert seemed proud to have been ostracized by the Nazis. When interviewed by Schlöndorff in the 1970s, she expressed pride over being featured in Goebbels' propaganda brochure ›Das erwachende Berlin‹ (The Awakening of Berlin). Her picture appears next to those of artists like Josephine Baker, Max Reinhardt and Max Liebermann with the caption: »Film and stage are being occupied by Jews«, serving as examples of »aberrations of their diseased brains«. She is indeed the antithesis to the racist national-socialist (»völkische«) understanding of art. In 1939 the magazine *Der Tanz* states: »With [the dancer Niddy] Impekoven there is the magic of the German fairytale forest, but here [in Gert's performances] gutter and filth. [...] Nothing was sacred to her. Her satire tore down everything.«

In 1938, Valeska Gert reluctantly emigrated to the US. She ended up in Provincetown, where she became the »centre of the gay scene and the European artists«<sup>13</sup>. She had close friendships with abstract expressionists as well as Tennessee Williams. Fritz Bultman explains how her charisma affected the place: »People did not come because of her directly, but in a sense they did come because she inhabited the place, because this meant that there had to be a special freedom inherent to the place.«<sup>14</sup>

A freedom indicated by Gert's uncompromising radicalism, her »fanaticism of unmasking«, her critique of success and the reifica-

tion of art, was rooted in her profound conviction »that it is beautiful to put yourself on the line, risk your credit and be forced to start from scratch again and again.«<sup>15</sup>

## Contamination

Later in life, Gert often seemed frustrated with the lack of recognition she received. She was not recognized for playing a pioneering role within the history of modern dance. At the same time she always insisted that dance and art in general should be developed out of the artists own time. She was not interested in the recycling of classical forms or nostalgia for the Golden Twenties. In order to collaborate with Valeska Gert, in order to let ourselves be possessed by her we do not consider her oeuvre as point of departure but we explore her strategies. The promise of infection with the Valeska-Gert-Virus of radical freedom and fanaticism of unmasking does not lie in the product (a particular dance) but in the process (laboratory/experiment/interference). The nagging question, which Valeska Gert raises from the grave is: How do we produce Störlaut<sup>16</sup>?

**“I wish to be buried in a cornfield  
my flesh becoming corn  
which becomes bread  
and I no longer dead”<sup>17</sup>**

For the first time I created something which was highly characteristic of this time – imbalance.

### Endnotes

- 1 Fred Hildenbrandt, *Die Tänzerin Valeska Gert*, Stuttgart 1928, p. 10. (translation L.M.).
- 2 Valeska Gert, *Mein Weg*, Leipzig 1931, p. 43.
- 3 Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: *The Reinvention of Nature*, New York 1991, p. 151.
- 4 Gert, *Zum Abend 24. Mai 1924/Variété*. (translation L.M.).
- 5 Sergej Eisenstein, *Im Weltmaßstab über Valeska Gert*, in Frank-Manuel Peter, *Valeska Gert – Tänzerin, Schauspielerin, Kabarettistin*, Berlin 1987, p. 121. (translation L.M.).
- 6 »Girl culture« is the German term for flapper culture which was actually a quite international phenomenon.
- 7 Mel Gordon, *Sündiges Berlin*, p. 25.
- 8 Clara Zetkin, *Für die Befreiung der Frau!* Rede auf dem Internationalen Arbeiterkongreß zu Paris, 1889 (Translation L.M.).
- 9 Susanne Foellmer, *Valeska Gert: Fragmente einer Avantgardistin in Tanz und Schauspiel der 1920er Jahre*, Bielefeld 2006, p. 88.
- 10 Valeska Gert, *Mein Weg*, Leipzig 1931, p. 21.
- 11 Tagesspiegel March 11. 1949, cited in Frank-Manuel Peter, *Valeska Gert – Tänzerin, Schauspielerin, Kabarettistin*, Berlin 1987 p. 95.
- 12 Cf. Kaja Silverman, *The female Voice in Cinema*.
- 13 Frank-Manuel Peter, *Valeska Gert – Tänzerin, Schauspielerin, Kabarettistin*, Berlin 1987.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Valeska Gert, *Mein Weg*, p. 39.
- 16 »Störlaut« can be loosely translated as sound interference. More than the interference itself it signifies a sound that not only interferes, but disrupts, hurts the listener or even destroys the speaker or microphone.
- 17 Valeska Gert, zitiert in Wolfgang Müller, *Valeska Gert. Ästhetik der Präsenzen*, Berlin 2010, p. 72.

### Picture credit

**P.35** From *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* (1889), in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Erfindung der Hysterie: die photographische Klinik von Jean-Martin Charcot*, Paderborn 1997, p. 238



**Wenn einem tänzerisch zumute ist, gerät man in eine Trunkenheit, die aus ursprünglich naturalistischen Tönen tänzerische Töne machen kann**

**SO**

## Scores

These three Scores show Elements and Sequencing of the Sound Dances Death, Hysteria and Disease. As written and drawn documents they mark the transition of Flierl's work in the archive, to her work with body and voice.

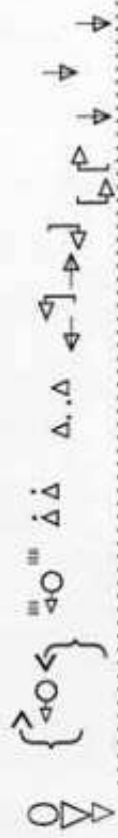
# Death



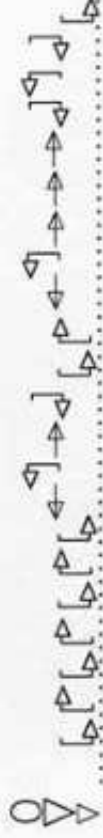
Ar Hi Hm Ha Ah



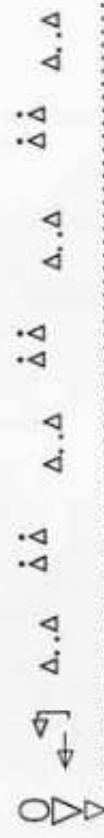
Ar Hi Hm Ha Ah



Ah Ha Hm Hi Hi Ar Ar



Ar Ra Ar Ra Ar Hi lh Ar Ra Hi i i H H H Ar



Hi Hm Ha Mh Ah Mh Ah Mh



lh Hm Ha Ha Ha



Ah





# Disease

we                      so                      sorry

we            are            so            sorry

sorry                      sorry                      Sorry Sorry

accept                      apology

get                      over                      it                      on

future                      together

wasn't directly                      me

my                      generation

forget                      about                      it

# STÖRLAUT

STÖRLAUT – a troubling noise, disturbingly loud, a sound of disruption – resisting the production of sense, subverting the harmonious process, dismembering apparatuses of order.

STÖRLAUT is a Vocal Dance Performance that commits itself to disharmony through a futuristic and speculative new interpretation of Valeska Gert's Sound Dances. Valeska Gert, a grotesque dancer in 1920s, Berlin declared herself the first vocalizing dancer of the world. The groundbreaking use of voice in Western dance traditions marked a tremendous shift in the representation and perception of the dancing body. Valeska Gert despised the mere reproduction of historical material as practiced by her contemporaries. How is it possible to weaponize her historic dances on the discursive battlefields of our own time? The current political climate of propaganda, post truth and alternative facts, makes

Gert's methods and her approach to the act of voicing ever more relevant. The Solo Performance shares its space with the audience taking part in a landscape of dissonance. STÖRLAUT Solo Dance manipulates the use of the voice to the edge, questions the expression of an authentic self shattering the holistic body. In the future the body will not make analogue sense – it moves in multiple directions at once. Jule Flierl separates body image and body sound through methods of dissociation and dislocation.

STÖRLAUT appropriates and mobilizes sound dance as a form capable of exploring non- and extra-verbal proclamation as other forms of speech are failing. Squeaking, roaring, stuttering, yawning or screaming are the material that makes audible the limitations of discourse, embracing and inhabiting emotional indeterminacy.

## DATES

25 th of April 2018 / La Raffinerie / Brussels\_PREMIERE

29 th – 31st of May / Rencontres Chorégraphiques Internationales de Seine-Saint-Denis / Paris

09 th of June / Schaubühne Lindenfels / Leipzig

15 th – 17 th of June / Sophiensaele / Berlin

## PARTNER

CharleroiDances Brussels; Rencontres chorégraphiques internationales de Seine-Saint-Denis Paris; P-Bodies Festival Leipzig; Goethe Institut; Sophiensaele Berlin; Honolulu Nantes; AdK Archiv Berlin; Kunsthaus KuLe Berlin; CND Paris; Zagreb Dance Center; Recherchestipendium Berliner Senat für Kultur und Europa