



M 01695 - 7 - F: 8,00 € - RD



FRANCE : 18€ / USA : 36\$ / UK : £18

# Who's afraid of the F-word

by Katerina Gregos, Brussels, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2009

**F**ensor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself 'Your body must be heard' (Hélène Cloux, *The Laugh of the Medusa*)

Who's afraid of the F-word is a curatorial project in print. As the title infers, the project evokes, in various ways, two words which still today are contested in many ways: feminism and 'the four letter word', both of which relate to issues of corporality and the body, the central theme of this issue of *IC*. But mostly the artists presented here are concerned with issues of representation, and are preoccupied with the

body as image. As images of the body have become increasingly standardized and commodified by the media, fashion, advertising and entertainment industries, it has become more urgent to counteract the unrealistic, hyper-perfect, now increasingly 'normalized' and variants 'photoshopped' similarly proffered by them. Similarly, questions of gender, sexuality and identity are most often than not dealt with as neat little packages that seem to suggest whether female, male or gay fluid, fucked up field and gender is bound up in subjectivities, paradoxes and ambiguities.

The artists whose work is on view here probe issues of body, gender politics and sexuality, beyond standardized norms and stereotypes. They wrest back control of the image of the body, to deconstruct normative conventions and point to alternative ways of inhabiting and 'displaying' it, while also intimating the constructedness of identity. They are concerned with 'writing the body', to borrow the term by Hélène Cloux, or inferring its relationships in an altogether more subjective, even open-ended way, that highlights the complexity of gender and sexuality. They breach taboos of various kinds, all of them linked to the representation of the

physical body, in order to re-signify the notion of gender and sexuality. In effect, they aim to counteract those representations of the body that have been produced and legitimized by the market, opening up a free field of interpretation and suggestion. They challenge the stereotypical perceptions of the representation of gender, pointing to a more variable, even shifting notion of identity and sexuality, and one in which masculinities and femininities are more intertwined and cross-pollinating rather than located at diametrically opposing poles, and thus suggesting overlapping sensibilities. Feminist undertones may on occasion be absent, but they are not of the

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old-fashioned, essentialist, burning type which disavows femininity, rather seen from a more contemporary perspective which acknowledges the complex, multi-layered feminine formation, as well as female and male subjectivity.

At the same time, the work of these artists also encourages us to look beyond the surface, to the dichotomies that the debate around the body often centres on between exterior and interior, inner and outer worlds, desire and decorum, freedom and repression. In many ways, our understanding of the body is still partial. Though the knowledge is there, many of us have no idea how the body works. Furthermore, we are, in many ways, still unable to reconcile interior and exterior, primateval and rational,

natural disposition and the socially constructed. We still pretty much conceive of the body as a surface or a skin, an externality, and beyond that it is a *corps étranger*. This, coupled with the taboos imposed by society, no doubt reinforces the sense of alienation some people feel as regards their own body, a body which they treat as a mere vehicle in which they are temporary occupants. Sexual liberation aside, the contemporary relationship with the body is still not one of total ease. From the increasingly widespread mania with frenetic modes of exercise, the fear of fat, and obsessive narcissism to the apathy, neglect, contempt and self-hatred of the body that lies at the opposite end of the spectrum, at which point and how does one manage to feel comfortable in one's own skin, so to speak, both physically as well as metaphorically?

Religion, bourgeois morality and the incessant politics of concealment and repression that go with them have certainly not fostered a better understanding of the body, sexuality, and all associated sticky, smelly, messy, viscous functions, not to mention forms of gender alterity. In any case, what is a 'normal' way of inhabiting, experiencing, using, altering and displaying the body? What is 'normal' in terms of sexual impulses and desires? And who is to decide? What we often fail to realize is that perceptions of the physical body are in a constant process of transformation, in which there is a continuous negotiation of definition, experience, behaviour and cultural coding. In his book *Corpus*, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy argues that in the light of the technological, biological, and political changes that have taken place, creating a

new understanding of the body becomes even more urgent. Georges Batalla, on the other hand, repeatedly wrote about the repression of the body, and its desires, and about the false socially constructed – decorum that subjugates and shrouds sexual impulses and other primeval instincts. In many ways, the artists featured in this project, as well as in the pages of the magazine, attempt to grapple with both these issues, while at the same time trying to somehow counteract the multiplying world of conventional ideas that has been imposed on the body in their work, the body becomes a site of question conventional ideas of representation and accompanying ideas of morality, propriety, and beauty. ■



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by Kate



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