

LUST

Hugo Bausch Belbachir in conversation
with Juliette Desorgues

Paris, January 2024.

Hugo Bausch Belbachir : The seminal 2008 retrospective at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, 'WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution' did not include a single work by Anita Steckel. Similarly, her work has been consistently excluded from accounts of what has been called 'Feminist Art', presumably because it formed an institutional critique of male domination while developing a heterosexual desire for the phallus. We know, however, that she was an active member of radical feminist groups in New York in the 1960s and '70s. Can you tell me about this context of representation, and how your research led you to understand Steckel as within, and at the same time outside artistic practices in the second wave of feminism in the United States?

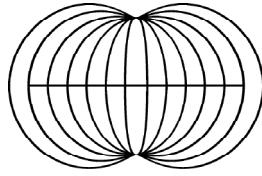
Juliette Desorgues : One reason Anita Steckel's work did not receive the same public reception as that of her contemporaries may be attributed to its divergence from the prevalent ideologies of the time. Despite not being featured in the 'WACK!' exhibition, art historian Richard Meyer addresses Steckel's work in the exhibition catalogue. Here he recognises the limited visibility afforded to artists like Steckel, who employed phallic imagery in the 1970s, acknowledging that their art challenged the neat alignment of sexuality with political ideologies, including feminism.

Blossoming during the mid-1960s and '70s in New York, Steckel's work indeed coincided with a period of significant cultural shift. The gradual relaxation of obscenity laws during this era ushered in the Golden Age of Porn, permeating both everyday culture and the arts. Notable instances include the release of the pornographic film «Deep Throat» in 1972 and Andy Warhol's films «Blow Job» (1964) and «Blue Movie» (1971). Simultaneously, societal conservatism persisted in its apprehension toward representations of the human body. The emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and '70s also prompted a shift amongst certain feminist artists who rejected tropes historically associated with patriarchal paradigms, in favor of more gynocentric depictions.

In this sense, Steckel's work became marginalized for its explicit exploration of sexuality, stirring controversy both within the conservative cultural establishment and certain feminist circles of the time who viewed her use of phallic imagery and heterosexual desire as a betrayal to the feminist cause.

H.B.B: Can you tell me about the 1972 exhibition at Rockland Community College, and what led to the Fight Censorship Collective of Women Artists?

J.D : This was a key moment both in Steckel's career as an artist and within the cultural sphere in New York at the time. Calls were made in 1972 to censor her exhibition at the Rockland Community College, due to its sexually explicit content, with legislators even claiming that the work belonged in a bathroom, instead of a gallery. Despite the backlash, and the threat of being turned down a professorship position at the college, Steckel refused to censor her show. In the aftermath of this public controversy, she gathered a group of like-minded feminist artists at her studio, including Louise Bourgeois, Judith Bernstein, Joan Semmel, Hannah Wilke, Juanita McNeeley, and Martha Edelheit. All participants shared a common commitment to challenging puritanical and sexist artistic norms of the time, ticularly in the realm of sexual representation by women. This collective, known thereafter as the Fight



Censorship Group, actively sought to promote the liberation of sexual expression in art, countering prevailing conservative trends.

H.B.B: Can you tell me about the title of this exhibition, 'LUST'?

J.D : The term «LUST» is used in both German and English to denote intense sexual desire. In the German language, it carries connotations of both desire and play; a nuanced meaning that resonates not only with Steckel's work but also with Constance Debré and Reba Maybury's writings, which were read as part of the exhibition. The title also finds resonance in the 1989 book «LUST» by Austrian author Elfriede Jelinek which explores power dynamics, sexuality and societal expectations within the context of a bourgeois dysfunctional family. Although lacking the playful and humorous elements present in the work of all three figures showcased in the exhibition, this book certainly provided an interesting backdrop to the Viennese iteration of the show at Wonerth Dejaco Gallery.

H.B.B : One of the major rhetorical components of Anita Steckel's work is her critique of the phallus. In the majority of these works, Steckel stages herself amidst New York skyscrapers, understood as phalluses in themselves, being political, economic and cultural symbols erected as masculine conceptions. She incorporates her naked body and those of other women, rubbing up against them as players in a space that is now theirs.

J.D : Steckel's use of phallic imagery holds a nuanced duality. In her series titled «The Grosz-est Bush: Goodbye and Good Riddance,» initially exhibited in 2008 at the Mitchell Alpus Gallery in New York, the erect penis serves as a potent symbol of patriarchal violence, particularly associated with the perils of hypermasculinity, notably manifested in the context of the Iraq war. Expanding on this theme, works from the «The New York Skyline» series (1970-1980) depict skyscrapers as towering phalluses, symbolising patriarchal power that dominates the urban landscape and society as a whole. Other series such as «Giant Women» (1969-1974) from the same period turn the phallus however into an object of sexual desire and pleasure. What is particularly interesting with Steckel's work is how it challenges traditional norms in the portrayal of sexuality. As seen in «The New York Skyline» series and the so-called Xerox prints from the 1970s, she avoids biological essentialism whereby the penis is portrayed as a disembodied, detachable cipher that can be manipulated akin to a sex toy.

H.B.B : Can you tell me more about the presence of Constance Debré and Reba Maybury within the exhibition?

J.D : I've always approached curating from a transhistorical standpoint; understanding historical contexts whilst reinterpreting them through a contemporary lens. When thinking about this exhibition on Steckel's work, I found it important to extend the discourse beyond the historical narrative of her time and connect it with present-day debates. This felt especially pertinent when considering Steckel's identity as a white cis heterosexual woman. The inclusion of Constance Debré and Reba Maybury's work in the show provides a contemporary context to the themes explored in Steckel's work where power and sexuality are tackled in a similarly unapologetic way. Their contributions also serve to critically engage with the legacy of second wave feminism: whilst Debré's writing chronicles the exploration of her queer sexuality, Maybury's texts explore her role as a political dominatrix, focusing on subverting traditional gender power dynamics through and within sex work.