

VISITOR REPORT

by Elisabeth Rafstedt

on Susanne Altmann's *When Technology Was Female: Histories of Construction and Deconstruction, 1917–1989*

Book Launch and Film Programme

Saturday 20 January 2024
Goethe-Institut Amsterdam
Herengracht 470
1017 CA Amsterdam

There are wooden panels in frames around berlock-patterned wallpaper, and in the library, on a big screen, loops the Super 8 film *Signals* (1989) by the Erfurt Women Artists' Group. The film is a collage of clips of performances among the antennas and treetops of an urban area, movement in rudimentary costumes and props like painted backdrops dragged still wet along the tarmac roofs to higher spots for dancing. The grain of the Super 8 and a constant soundscape of clunky music merges the clips together. Here and there, in the landscape of the city, civilians act as if nothing is happening when a smartly dressed woman walks by. Heels and all business, she has a gigantic flat head like a lion troll, eyes the size of clementines and long braids that could have been woven from a mop. The performative status-quo-look-away is so secretive.

On the upper floors of the Goethe-Institut in Amsterdam, in many more dark rooms, are clips of early Soviet and late Eastern bloc films. They shift from production to the body, to the machine as a body and body as machine. Between the clips and on the cover of the book being launched, the title is distorted: *When Technology Was Female* repeats like a signal, a pulse, a snippet of propaganda.

There's a spot in my heart for soft books. Books that lie satisfyingly flat to produce good landscape A4s on the bed of a copy machine. Unfolding easily, each spread consists of three spaces, columns or channels. Their contents flow vertically, like scrolls. At the same time there are horizontal links between the right-hand channel of 'the historian', 'the Hélène Cixous-esque'

left-hand column in a typewriter font, and the images in their gutter-channel. This mysterious margin of a book: the gutter, divides the images in half, letting them bend for the binding and captioning them in narrow columns of a smaller-sized typewriter font. Generous white spaces in the text channels stretch time and hint towards other horizontal happenings. There's one ink and it is black. This monotone rendering of the archival image material in the gutter contributes to the book's reflection on urgency. There are two types of paper, but they differ only in colour, not in texture, and the division is cut-clear – yellow becomes pink in the exact middle of the book. And although the book is divided into two main chapters, the colour change is determined by page count. Material overrides content.

A piece of samizdat ephemera projected during the book presentation bears a stamp reading 'No More Utopias'. The once utopian ideas are replaced by a utopian hope for no more utopian ideas. Was it common knowledge that another reality was possible? How was it imagined? What hopes will be talked about when it is no longer 'easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'? I look at this archival material: instead of introspection there's an outwardness in discussing the encompassing societal machinery of communication and production. Instead of managing oneself within society there's an embodiment of society – costumes made of newspapers and antennae – seizing the means of dissemination, shaping it. And the swinging characters of the Erfurt Women Artists' Group saying look, look, behind the words in the newspaper is typography on paper. Lines encircle the body and bodies leap out of these borders like froggies.

ABOUT THE EVENT

Susanne Altmann's publication *When Technology Was Female: Histories of Construction and Deconstruction, 1917–1989*, was launched at the Goethe-Institut in Amsterdam Saturday 20 January 2024. A film programme throughout the institution featured works from different geographic, temporal and aesthetic constellations, including *Aelita* (1924, dir. Yakov Protazanov); *Zemlya* (1929, dir. Oleksandr Dovzhenko); *Fraülein Schmetterling* (1965, dir. Kurt Barthel); *Daisies* (1966, dir. Věra Chytilová); *Wäscherinnen* (1972, dir. Jürgen Böttcher); *Getting to Know the Big Wide World* (1979, dir. Kira Muratova) and *Signale* (1989, Erfurt Women Artists' Group). The afternoon culminated with a conversation between Altmann and design collective Experimental Jetset with whom the art historian realised the book's experimental form. The conversation was moderated by If I Can't Dance curator Megan Hoetger.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elisabeth Rafstedt is a designer who lives and works in Amsterdam, where with Johanna Ehde she co-runs the Rietland Women's Office, an independent graphic design collective interested in research, education and publishing from a feminist perspective. Thanks to her collaborations and reading, her design works often take the form of (applied) research, dismantling the distinction between theory and practice. She graduated from the Institute for Graphic Design at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. Her thesis on collective graphic design practices in feminist publishing was nominated for Rietveld SELECTED 2017.

ABOUT THE VISITOR REPORT

At If I Can't Dance we see the visitor report as a method of documentation. The affectual, relational and embodied nature of performance work is not always easily captured in audio-visual formats. To supplement such formats, If I Can't Dance commissions written visitor reports, which are meant to offer subjective responses to a lived experience of a work and its context. The visitor report is, therefore, not to be confused with a critical review. It is first and foremost a form of witnessing. The people commissioned

to write the report span a range of positions and practices within and outside the field of art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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WG-Plein 881
1054 SM Amsterdam
www.ificantdance.org
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