

*Aber Freund! wir kommen zu spät.
Zwar leben die Götter,
Aber über dem Haupt droben in anderer
Welt.
Endlos wirken sie da und scheinens wenig zu
achten,
Ob wir leben, so sehr schonen die
Himmlischen uns.
Denn nicht immer vermag ein schwaches
Gefäß sie zu fassen,
Nur zu Zeiten erträgt göttliche Fülle der
Mensch.*

**But, friend, we've come too late.
Though the gods are living,
Over our heads, above in a different world,
Endlessly they do their work, and are so
gracious to us.
They seem to pay little attention whether we
live or die,
For a delicate vessel can't always contain
them,
Only at times can men bear the gods'
fullness.¹**

One day in May, Hannah Mevis was wearing a sculpture on her body. A wooden geometric structure in a cylindrical shape that she describes as architecture. By wearing it, she opens the shell of wooden rods to invite others to look inside and smell the pile of pancakes it contains. As often is the case in her work, this first action can be seen with a later text edition: *Today I tried the pancakes*, where we can read: *"They are called Moroccan pancakes and it is a Sunday market tradition to eat them. People told me about several times. People I got to know while cooking and exchanging flavours. Friends who brought me new tastes and made my tongue tickle."*

Hannah's tongue and eyes, her legs and skin, her memory and her smiling, the words she heard from others and the sounds of those words, the body language and the desires of her friends, their knowledge, all this is part of the shape we are looking at. Hannah enjoys cooking and sharing meals, so she explores this dish that is prepared in so many variations in different countries and cultures. If the item of architecture she wears were a simple geometrical shape or a display to show the actual objects it contains, it would be impossible for us to

start traveling in our minds and through our taste buds. There are indeed universes of words and gestures between these spongy pancakes soaked in honey and butter that we are actually smelling, and the other forms that are described in the edition, the Gözleme, the traditional Turkish flatbread made only with flour, salt and water, but folded – and this is important for Hannah – folded, like that other Berber recipe, the Mmsemen pancake, from the outside to the inside after being filled. Yes, folded, like the clouds fold one over the other, as becomes obvious when she watches them moving in a windy blue sky: *"In fact, the most fascinating thing for me is the way that Mmsemen is prepared and finding that the dough folds in a similar way to the clouds. That was that day's experience"*².

Hannah is never really alone, even in those moments when she is sitting in her workshop preparing some coffee to start off a new piece or a new text. None of her projects are addressed to an abstract viewer. None of her works assign a given place because everything we look at, hear, manipulate, eat, read, is intended to be shared and experienced within a concrete community. Hannah always works as an actor, artist, activist or curator, administrator and organizer, and she performs all these roles together, in an on-going process of research of elective affinities and genuine political engagement. This is certainly a characteristic she shares with several artists of the latest generation: the attempt to act in direct connection to others. A huge number of these attitudes aim to build a new political and social consciousness by overcoming a traditional idea of shape, as artists of older generations did. Tommaso Trini wrote in *Alphabet for the Body*³ (a text of 1969 that was reedited in the catalogue of *When Attitude Becomes Form*) that the young artists of the sixties *"found and spread the practice of a community condition that achieves the aesthetic one, moving from theory to practice"*. Yes, action is again at the heart of new attitudes, and aesthetic approaches are often judged as limited, or inappropriate to the urge to change contemporary life. But can this older attempt to overcome the problem of shape be re-enacted so directly?

1 Friedrich Hölderlin, excerpt from the seventh stanza of the poem 'Bread and Wine', *Elegies*, 1800-1804. Translation by Maxine Chernoff and Paul Hoove.

2 Hannah Mevis in a recent mail to the author.

3 Tommaso Trini, 'Nuovo alfabeto per il corpo', in *Domus*, n. 470, Milan, January 1969, pp. 45-51.

The limits Tommaso Trini saw at the time are now the real challenges that very few artists seem to confront head-on: “*This necessarily has the characteristics of a minority art, but an irradiating minority. To articulate the affirmative “change of life” remains its problem, because it hasn’t found its island of authenticity yet, nor it is going to look for it by itself.*” Trini saw clearly that the problem was spread into two questions that are difficult to articulate: authenticity, and the aim to *irradiate* onto or within a larger community.

If Hannah Mevis has a clear political idea of what the potential of irradiation of a given minority is, her project is not to change lives in an avant-garde mode, or to try to influence production, morality and ethics in culture, as we have encountered so often in recent collective projects. Her critical attitude is aware of the complex relations that exist within individuals and different cultures. She never sees her work or her action in a socio-political abstraction of the singular. Her idea of the human is at the opposite end, a perceiving body that is presumed to be authentic and can never be reduced to a social or historical category alone. Even if influenced by social behaviours, human relations are always one to one; they proceed from intimacy to intimacy, a complex condition of experimentation, among singular and shared universes.

In the context of a strong desire to act with and through the bodies, if one were to try to explain Hannah Mevis’ work, the very notion of action seems reductive. To better evaluate her idea of an acting body, we have to take a step backwards to the more ancient terms of *enérgeia*. This Aristotelian notion has to be translated with two modern terms: force in action. And the term force has to be read in the abstract sense of potentiality of energy and in the more practical one of the energy captured and ready to act in a body, machine, or physical aggregate.

In Hannah Mevis work, the energy of a minority is not simply a project to change life, but the force of the bodies themselves, their potential energy. This shift of the concept of energy, the force in action, from a social body to an authentic and singular one, could be interpreted as a selfish and hedonistic attitude, a negative political disengagement by contemporary artists

dreaming about the coming back of a *Monteverità*⁴ society. On the contrary, it is a highly political move, because it takes another path from older revolutionary modes, not using the individual and his or her body for the withdrawal from society, but literally passing through bodies. It is not based on a social approach to the place of a body, but on the idea that a body is the melting point of a culture and a universe of complex organs and feelings. A body does not simply belong to a milieu; a body is in the first place a milieu in itself.

From this radical position none can simply presume that *I is I*, because he or she can no longer refer to an outstanding social structure (reality is reality, so I am what I am). The individual is no more a fragment of a collective community. At every moment I have to experience again what the presupposed being *me* is actually feeling. The antique separation in Greek philosophy of what is before – and so to say, the grounding of the being, the real before *me* feeling it – from what is experiencing the living *I* through his or her body, has produced a tragic separation in modernity. In the view of Giorgio Agamben (*The Use of Bodies*⁵), what we name action in modern culture has become the only political condition and horizon of the free individual: I have to act to know that I am, or, I have to produce an action on me and on the others (a war, an economical or political change, a revolution) to demonstrate to myself that I’m really there. Giorgio Agamben sees in his last book on Punch⁶ that there is the necessity to think up a new political action out of this radical separation of the intimate individual from his acting, constructed and outstanding identity. The figure of Punch is that possibility, of a body out of action, which means out of that heroic *Action* with a capital “A”. From the point of view of *Action*, Punch lives in a kind of state of idiocy (the one who is equal only to him or herself is idiotic), where the simple

4 In 1900, Henry Oedenkoven and his companion Ida Hofmann purchased a hill in Ascona and established the Co-operative vegetarian colony Monte Verità on principles of primitive socialism. Anarchist physician Raphael Friedeberg moved to Ascona in 1904, attracting many other anarchists and artists to the area, thereby transforming the place into an individualistic vegetarian settlement that would later become the Monte Verità Sanatorium.

5 Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV*, 2. Translated by Adam Kotsko. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.

6 Giorgio Agamben, *Pulcinella. Or Entertainment for Children*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018.

actions of nourishing the body, cultivating its relation to the real not by naming, but by feeling and doing, takes over the necessity of demonstrating one's existence. But couldn't it be that it urges to make ours the point of view of Punch, that of the body itself? And in fact, in the approach of Hannah Mevis the artwork never presupposes an acting and efficient society of isolated (neo-capitalist?) individuals. It never produces *Action*, as it never demands introspection against social power, but an open positive sharing attitude of real and politically aware intimate lives: a reflexion – this is the term Hannah Mevis prefers – a mirroring authentic *I*.

That is why the artworks of Hannah Mevis are objects on the same level as all other objects. There is no difference between the pancake, the wooden box and the exchanging individuals who do the cooking. This kind of new object dismisses and disarms the radical separation in our perception between me as individual and my actual, social and political reality. Intimacy is reality, *tout court*, and it is for this reason that irradiation is a real active force of the body, a kind of actual heterotopian *Widerraum*, the German translation of Foucault's idea of a real place juxtaposed to a strong political space, a space where weakness can find an actual form. A space "reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis"⁷. In this condition of juxtaposed space to the dominant idea of *Action*, Hannah Mevis develops a new kind of energy that is able to produce potential power through the weakness of our perceiving *I*, an *enérgeia* in action. An artwork for a delicate vessel that can't always contain it.

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⁷ Michel Foucault, 'Des Espaces Autres' in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, N.5, 46–49, Paris, October 1984. Translation Jay Miskowiec. *Of Other Spaces*. *Diacritics*. 16 (1): 22–27. Available online at foucault.info.