



This talk between Maria Wollny [MW] and Yvon Chabrowski [YC] took place in March 2021 and is part of a series of conversation pieces.

YC Maria Wollny, you appear in *Horizontal*, one of the video sculptures in a series of mine that focuses on the screen. In *Screen*, *Swaying*, *Level* and *Horizontal* the surface of the screen appears as part of the monitor and as part of the image itself. The glass membrane, the screen's surface, the defining element between the interior and exterior worlds of media images, becomes the object of the performance.

When I developed *Horizontal*, I was exploring how the media are seeing and presenting ageing female bodies in today's visual economy. Are you seeing visual representations or images of bodies you identify with, either now or for that matter in the past?

MW Over the past few years I've been noticing more best-age models in ads for personal care products and cosmetics. Commercials and posters are also showing more older people these days.

I'm interested in dance, and as a member of the 60+ group in the "dance on local" company I'm seeing older dancers perform with younger ones there. So yes, I'm coming across a growing number of people my age.

YC That's interesting. I mainly see very young people in advertisements. And even if they do have grey hair they reflect an idealized, almost youthful image.

When I was looking for a performer for *Horizontal*, I could find hardly any older performers and that was a problem. There's not much information out there about performers. I only know the "dance on local" company because you told me about it. Now I've gotten to know a lot of performers from working with them on my own projects. In your case I approached you at lunch at the Baldon in Lobe Block. It was clear right away that you're deeply interested, you want to express yourself, and you lead a very active life. Can you tell me about your different artistic practices, and how long you've been doing them?

MW Yvon, you're right, I'll never manage to limit myself to just one thing.

YC Indeed, you have a wide range of interests and you go out and act on them.

MW I studied fine arts, meaning painting, from 1971 to 1976 at the HDK (Academy of Arts) in Berlin which is now the UDK (University of the Arts). My parents had some reservations so I also studied art education. In 1976 I got a student teacher's position at an academic high school in Spandau. I took the second state exam when I was seven months pregnant. When my daughter was about a year old I applied to a private academic high school and worked there for 36 years. At some point I became the head of the fine arts department. The decent salary meant I could afford an au pair. At that time I was still living with my husband, who was very active as an independent painter and also at the HDK. In addition to my job and family, I've always painted and had exhibitions, both group and solo ones.

YC You lived in West Berlin in the 1970s. I was born in East Berlin at the end of the 1970s. That's why I'd like to hear a little about your life as a student—what was it like to be a student in West Berlin in the 1970s? What was it like to study at the HDK?

MW After completing my A levels I was able to go straight to the HDK and study at its department of crafts and fashion. I was very disappointed by the fashion track. It was totally traditional. Actually I wanted to study painting, and with my parents' concerns in mind I switched to the HDK's education department. It was fantastic. Marvelous large ateliers, only a few students, independent work, and a few lectures on educational science and philosophy along with the chance to paint.

The professors all had ateliers there but we saw them maybe once a week to discuss our work. It was different from the workshops for printing, textile design, woodworking and so on. Otherwise we met at the Zwiebelfisch pub and drank quite a bit.

YC Were there female as well as male professors?

MW The painting and sculpting classes were led by male professors. There were four female professors that I remember: Professor Elisabeth Sinken for "paper and cardboard"—the department was really called that—in Grunewaldstrasse with the art educators, and Professor Meyer-Winkelsdorf for textile design. The theatre department was also headed by a woman. In Hardenbergstrasse I attended art history lectures held by a female professor who always started by greeting the students with "Gentlemen and ladies". I've been wanting to find their full names and the exact years of their professorships, but haven't found anything about them online—no search results for either the HDK or the UDK. I only know the first name of Professor Sinken from a post about her husband.

YC It's a shame how invisible this generation of female professors seems to be in historical perspective. But it sounds like you had a carefree life as a student. Were your parents supporting you? How many women and how many students from other countries were studying at the HDK in Berlin? What kinds of political issues influenced you or prompted you to take action?

MW It was an exhilarating time because I could concentrate on my painting and enjoy the sexual liberation and so on because of the Pill. My parents financed my studies. I also worked as an usher at the Schiller Theater and at my father's company to earn money to travel.

I don't remember any students from other countries. There were roughly equal numbers of female and male students. It was a restless time politically. I myself was not very active, but remember a demonstration following the death of Holger Meins. The circumstances that led to his death really affected me. At the demonstration I experienced police aggression directly in the form of tear gas, and could only turn around and run.

YC A few months ago I was researching work by Marianne Wex at the nGbK (neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst) and found out about the "Künstlerinnen International 1877–1977" ("female artists international 1877–1977") exhibition held in Berlin in 1977. On reading the press reports I was astonished at how hard people were arguing over the concept of genius. Many journalists explicitly wanted to find something female in the work of female artists. Often while using language from a deeply patriarchal perspective.

MW I wasn't aware of that.

YC Your background is in painting and you're now a performer and a street artist. How did that happen?

MW A good 20 years ago I started learning tango argentino. I explored both roles—female and male—in order to really internalize and understand this dance. My first trip to Buenos Aires, the birthplace of tango, changed a lot about how I do art. I was fascinated by the street art there.

Since 2009 I've been active as a street artist under the name "woyy". Before Covid my motifs were "hugs and kisses" that I sprayed on abandoned sofas and refrigerators. During Covid there's now the "Little Prince" as a guardian angel or "hugs with pillows". In good weather I go out on the streets and spray.

I designed a motif for the *forwards never ends* dance performance that Eva-Martina Günther and I developed. Since retirement I've discovered a love for performance and the stage. In 2016 I was part of the *Atlas—Version Berlin* project. Shortly thereafter I joined the 60+ group and Martin Nachbar took me on for *Zusammen Bauen* which he staged together with Gabi dan Droste. During the rehearsals for that piece was when you and I met at the Baldon at Lobe Block in a lunch break.

YC Your *forwards never ends* performance addresses the limited amount of time left in your lives, and the presence and fragility of your bodies. Is that also how you would put it?

There's a moment in the performance when you wrap yourself and Eva-Martina in white tulle—it looks like the two of you are in a cocoon.

What sort of process did you go through in developing the performance?

MW We talked a lot at first, came up with ideas, and then simply started moving. It quickly became clear we would take a collage-like approach. We wanted images to arise, which could be interpreted in different ways.

Age is one topic in the piece, simply because we're old. We want to show different stages of life and question clichés about ageing, for example with the part about the disco and Patti Smith when recreating a youthful memory makes us dance happily in old age. The tulle has many functions, cocoon-like in the beginning when Eva-Martina frees herself from it. In another scene she wears it like a burqa or a wedding veil. We later end up struggling underneath it. I give up and Eva-Martina drapes the white fabric over my lifeless body like a shroud or wings. We want to show that life is worth living, or is all the more worth living, when you have what might only be a quarter of it left.

Translation by Marlene Schoofs