

## 150 Phalluses in Feminist Art Today

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Aude du Pasquier Grall, from the series *Le Cycle Masculin #7 (The Male Cycle #7)* (2005-2008), video (© Aude du Pasquier Grall, photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

SAARBRÜCKEN, Germany — After surviving the hip Berlin Gallery Weekend in the male-dominated German art world with the dull sense of inadequacy under the theme of, “Why am I here to celebrate white men’s exhibits?,” I was magnetically drawn to *In the Cut – The Male Body in Feminist Art*, a group exhibition in the green, verdant region of the Saarland that borders France, known for its strong feminist presence. The exhibition’s excellent roster of artists includes my personal heroines, such as Louise Bourgeois, Betty Tompkins, Tracy Emin, Sophie Calle, Joan Semmel, Susan Silas, as well as Herlinde Koeble, Eunice Golden, Aude du Pasquier Grall, Anna Jermolaeva, Alicia Framis, Anke Doberauer, ORLAN, and Julika Rudelikus. The promise that many of the artists would be in attendance at the opening reception, as well as the curator’s transatlantic trip to see *love in the ruins; sex over 50* by my friend, artist Susan Silas, had piqued my curiosity.

Driving 110 mph on the Autobahn between the tempting green hills of the “Valleys of the Ill and their Tributary Streams” seemed like the perfect way to approach this nucleus of feminist energy far away from urban centers overrun by trends. Unconsciously, it felt like a journey to a spiritual retreat, designed to transform my soul, to inspire a new awakening of power (differently bewitched was an angry, enraged, uncomfortable man in the audience). In the ongoing struggle for gender equality, we owe what strides we’ve made to these lovely ladies of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s who searched for light in the dark.



Installation view of *In the Cut – The Male Body in Feminist Art* at the Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken (photo by Anton Minavey, courtesy of the artist and Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken, © Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken)

Full of reverence, I strode down the halls of the Stadtgalerie in the center of Saarbrücken. At the core of this psychological labyrinth, with its side rooms, stairs, and branches, I met with Dr. Andrea Jahn, Director of the museum, curator, and head of this avant-garde conspiracy. She led me to the exhibition’s holy grail: 150 phalluses, the portrayal of erotic masculinity from a female perspective. Jahn remarked to me, in the vein of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, that the erotic male body became invisible to sustain the idea of phallic power. “In European art, the first and foremost task of the female nude was to serve the erotic fantasies of private patrons. In modern art, it worked

as the projection screen of the artist's desires and as a proof of his superiority and genius," she explained. With wide eyes, I followed her through this enlightening penis parade.

The exhibition colorfully commences with Joan Semmel's orgasmic *Sex Paintings* from the 1970s. Semmel explained to me in an interview, "The whole idea of shaming in sexuality that had to be hidden was put back on display in my work, the male using the woman as a tool rather than a real love contact." She emphasizes the resistance against her work: "People were shocked, and I was shocked that they were shocked because there was so much harsh sexuality around us in advertisement." A painting from 1971 shows a toilet; Semmel calls it the "Hot Seat," at which I had to laugh.



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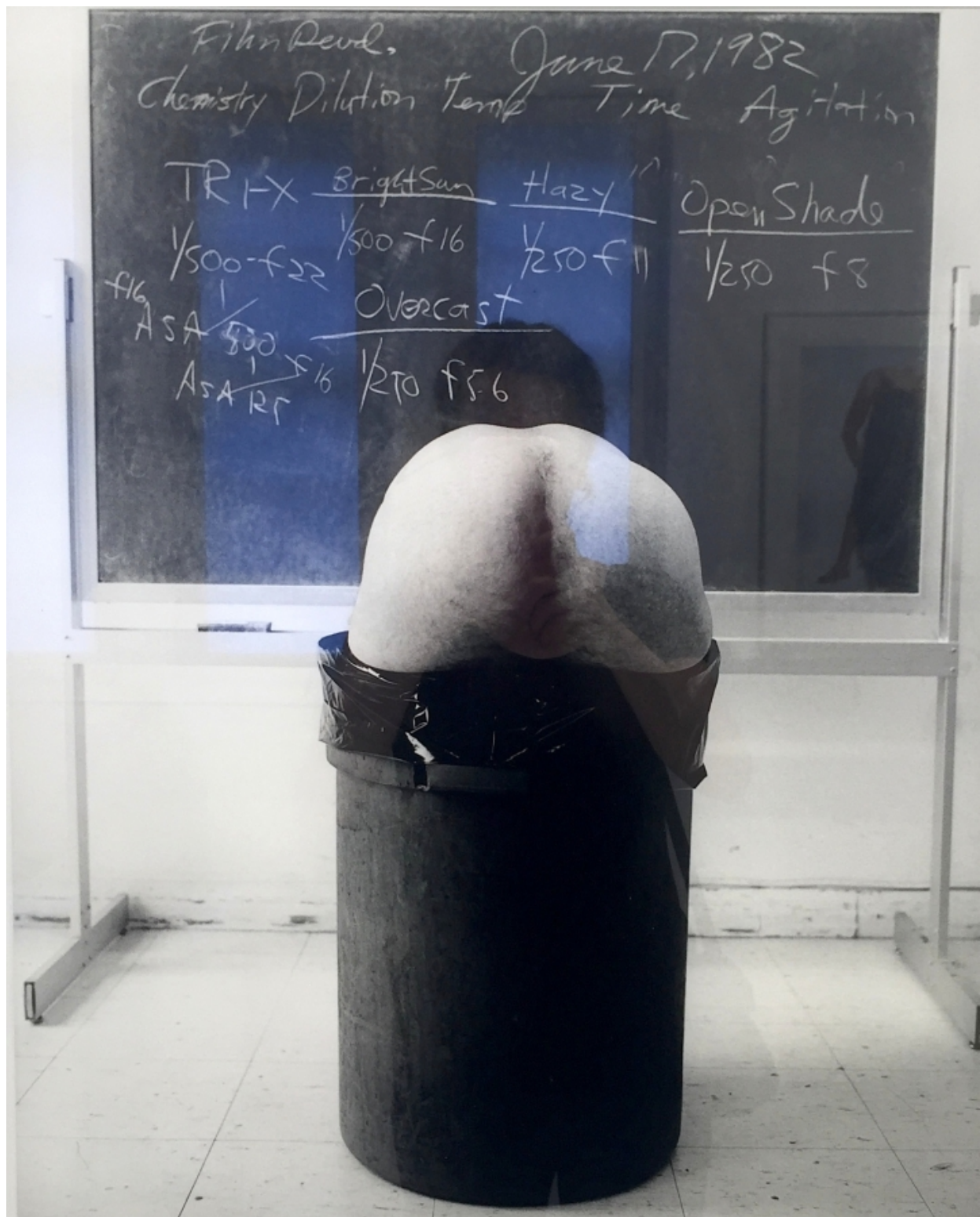
The exhibition continues onto Eunice Golden's nude studies of her male friends. In "Purple Sky" (1969) and "Metamorphosis #12" (1973) Golden renders male body parts like landscapes. She told me these were game-changing to her artistic process because, "[...] while there was no open sexual encounter, the [typical gender] roles of artist and model were reversed." In her hilarious video *Blue Bananas and other Meats* (1973) a blue penis is among the various delicious desserts in the lap of a man. "People called me the penis artist," she said.



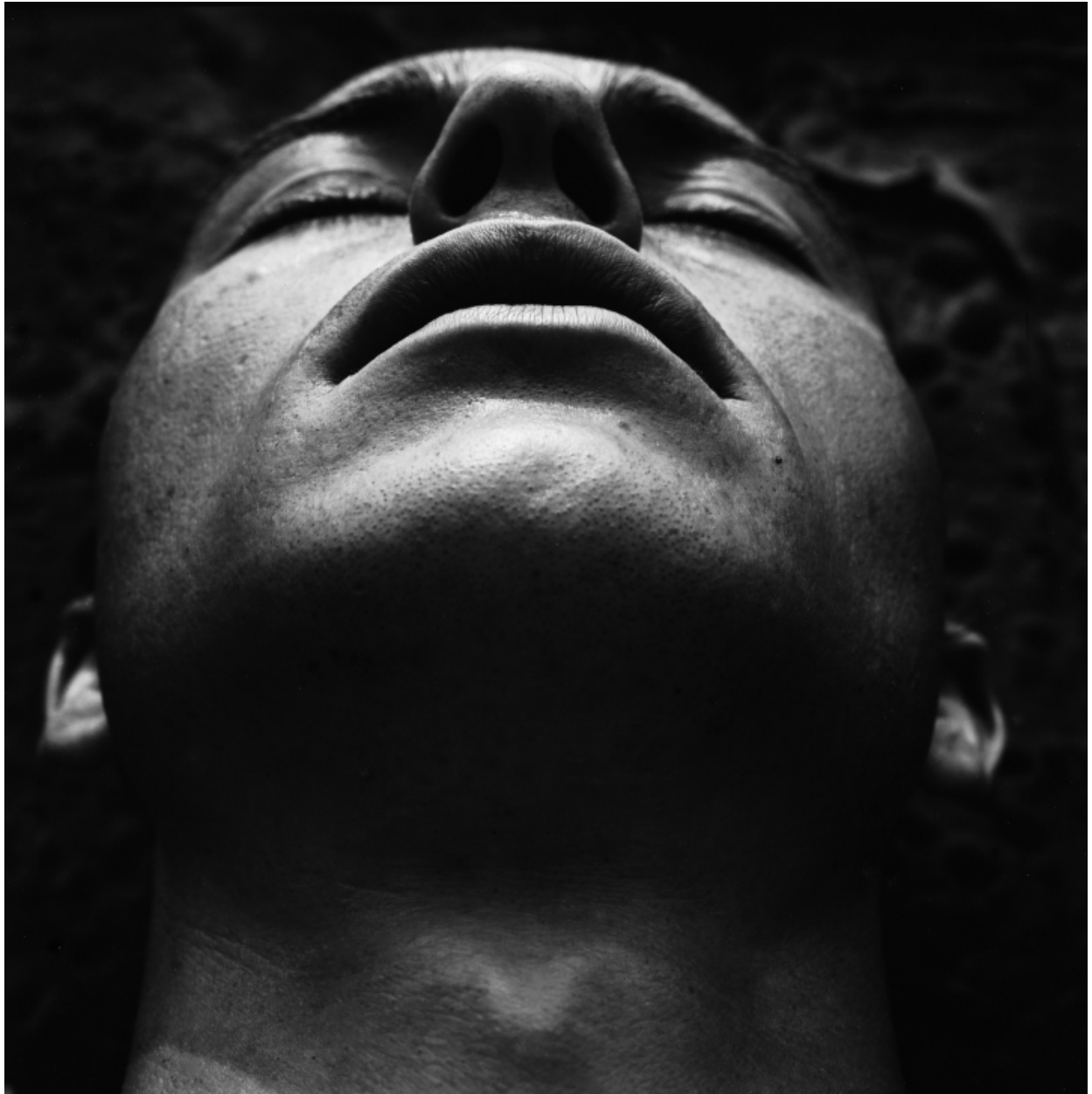


Alicia Framis, *8 de Junio, Las Modelos Libran* (2006), video (© VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2018)

Tabooing and censorship of the female point of view are recurring themes of *the Cut*. In the 2006 video *8 de Junio, Las Modelos Libran* by Spanish artist Alicia Framis, nude male models parade down a runway carrying handbags. The photorealistic *Fuck Paintings* (1969-1974) by Betty Tompkins, once labeled pornography, now in the collection of the Centre Pompidou, speak to the institutional bias, in art and pornography, against erotic imagery made by women.



Herlinde Koebl, from the series *Men* (1982-84) (© Herlinde Koebl, photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Herlinde Koelbl, "A. Williams" from the series *Men* (1982-84) (©Herlinde Koelbl)





Herlinde Koelbl, "A. Williams" from the series *Men* (1982-84) (©Herlinde Koelbl)

In a large room, black-and-white photographs by the celebrated Munich-based photographer Herlinde Koelbl reveal her aesthetic interest in the erotic male body. Koelbl described her guiding questions to me as, "The topic of masculinity in various variations — what do we trust, what do we allow, what do we tolerate as women? Our own position on sexuality is present. What do we want ourselves? What makes us feel that we like men? What are we afraid of? Are we afraid?" In one photograph, taken when she was a visiting professor at a Pratt Institute in New York in the 1980s, from the series *Men* (1982–1984), her teaching assistant tucks his body upside down in a garbage can, exposing only his bare butt. In another from the series, "Christian Kohlmann" (1982), a slender fashion designer stands undressed next to a female mannequin in a tuxedo and the bare top half of a male mannequin. "A. Williams" (1984) is an intimate image of a massive penis adorned with thick pubic hair, lurking in a pair of unzipped jeans, tamed



only by a belt. Koebl's gaze remains politely restrained but humorously direct regarding her subject matter.



Susan Silas, from the series *love in the ruins; sex over 50* (2008-13), archival ink jet print, 80 x 120 cm (© Susan Silas)

The series *love in the ruins; sex over 50* by Susan Silas seems almost harmless, yet the sexualization of older bodies continues to challenge viewers, the realities of age bringing us to the border of shame and voyeurism. However, the spice lies in the sense of liberation in the images, and truth of life and death. A similar feeling of being captured in the act of voyeurism accompanies the two-channel video installation *Le Cycle Masculin #7 – j'attends sa naissance*, (2005-8) by Aude du Pasquier Grall, in which the artist portrays herself as the dominant photographer and her younger lover as erotic muse, lushly posing on the floor. Men seem replaceable in Anke Doberauer's life-sized full body portrait paintings of proud men in Marseille. Narcissistic Adonises named "Sayed" (1994), "Leo" (1995), and "Djamel" (1993) are filled with self-admiration; half-smiling, they peer at us or stare at their private parts.

*In the Cut* is a seductive and enigmatic mental play in which it becomes possible, inescapable in fact, to glimpse the world — desire, sexuality, power — through a feminine lens. Expressions among viewers of curiosity, pleasure, shame, and fear

clearly speak to its success and strength. The revelation about ourselves that emerge with these artworks open deep into private boundaries, and allow us to consider inner values and differences that depart from the categorical roles of late capitalist existence.

In the Cut – The Male Body in Feminist Art continues at the Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken (St. Johanner Markt 24, Saarbrücken, Germany) through September 30.