

Deferred Action: Re-staging Disagreement in 1960s Vienna

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One notable legacy of Viennese Actionism is an apparently undiminished ability to polarize audiences. Many have criticized it for misogyny or crypto-theology, while others claim it maintains a transgressive charge. While these poles of opinion would seem incompatible, they nevertheless share a tendency to reduce Actionism to a monomorphic movement, privileging a limited body of work while perpetuating a restrictive conception of the action. This paper seeks to counteract this problem by tracing three movements of differentiation within the ostensible unity of Actionist practice. It considers the paradoxical status of certain canonical Actions before proceeding to evaluate three alternatives: the action films of Kurt Kren; the action-event, a species of public appearance that proliferated in the later 1960s; and the media action, a form aligned with expanded cinema and underground film.

In surveying a field that spans participatory Happenings, Expanded Cinema, destructivism, and radical agitation, the paper looks to dislodge actions from their received categorization as a strain of performance art. Instead, it reframes the action as a contingent encounter between aesthetics and politics, an unpredictable event activating and provisionally rearticulating various circuits linking these fields. In doing so, it means to think through a specific connotation of incongruity: disagreement. By tracing a movement from the unintended consequences of early Actions to the explicit adoption of contradiction as method by Peter Weibel and VALIE EXPORT, the paper analyzes the relation between various slippages — intention/effect, medium/message, action/reaction — and the mobilization of dissensus, critically reassessing Jacques Rancière's notion of disagreement (*mésentente*) as an event by which democratic antagonisms become manifest as irreducibly incommensurable with the prevailing order of politics.