

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

BOMB

Annette Messenger

by Bernard Marcade

Winter 1989



Annette Messenger by David Seidner, c. 1988.

“She would have been able to pick a body for him because she possessed, in a lonely girl’s secret imagination, a reserve of thighs, arms, torsos, faces, hair, teeth, napes, knees and she knew how to put them together to make a living man out of it all, to whom she could lend a soul—always the same one for each of these constructions: the soul that she would have wanted to possess.”

Jean Genet, *Notre Dame des Fleurs*

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BERNARD MARCADE Annette Messenger, the peddler?

ANNETTE MESSENGER I am the peddler of chimeras, the peddler of simian dreams, Arachnian delirium.

BM Annette Messenger the faker?

AM I am the faker, the faker of repainted photographs, deformed enlargements, superimposed negatives, blurred close ups, rebounding images, distorting lenses. . .

BM Annette Messenger the liar?

AM I am the liar, the messenger (*messagere*) of false premonitions, of dubious love, suspicious memories, the trainer of paper spiders. . .

BM Why all these titles, all these roles after those of the collector, the practical woman?

AM These are the titles of nobility which I've earned and which protect me from the exterior, from time which passes, from myself. . . I've always been interested in devalued arts. As a woman, I was already a devalued artist. Being a member of a minority, it is in the order of things that I should be attracted to so called marginal objects. From there, doubtless, also comes my taste for folk art, proverbs, the rough art created by the insane, maxims, fairytales, the art of the everyday, embroidery, film. Photography happens to be a devalued art, devalorised with regard to painting. . . I think minorities become strong precisely because they take advantage of their own strengths, and not because they try to imitate those of the majority. . .

BM There is always in your work an idea of privileging the small side of things, the cracks, the nocturnal and guilty face of our feelings and our actions. It's a certain way of recognizing that beings are not whole, that they are doomed to being broken up and torn apart.

AM Painting is a totalitarian medium. In the same way that passionate love is a dictatorship, the body—and Pasolini saw this clearly—can be the privileged site of this dictatorship, indeed even of this fascism. . . That has always frightened me.

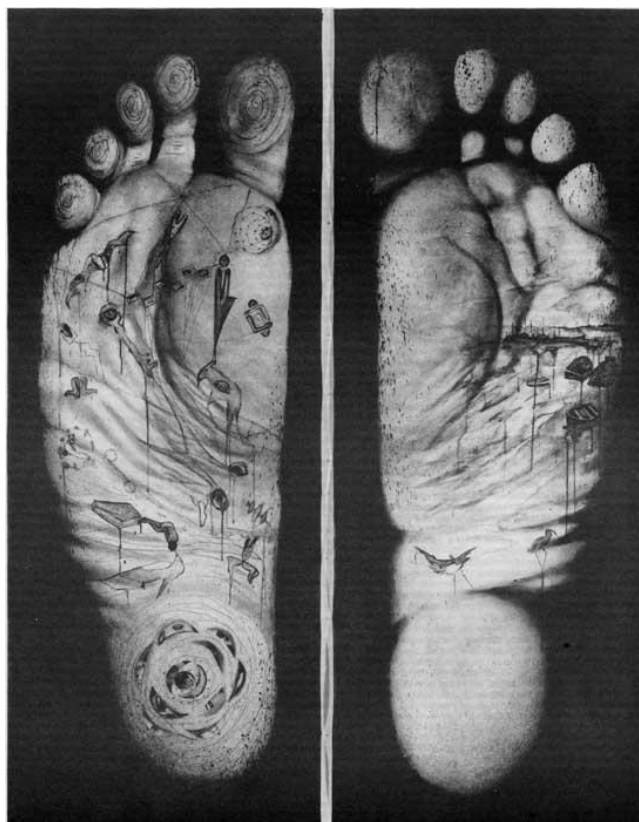
BM You seem to avoid this route. The body in your work is not a body of glory, a victorious body, it is rather, a fragmented body, subject to the horrors of distortion, indeed even of ridicule.

AM The body as directed by Pasolini is not in itself a body in glory, but a body in supplication. For me, it's a "natural" gesture to rip bodies apart, cut them up. . . We are all definitely torn apart. It's also my desire to reveal scraps, fragments, instants of things; so that there are only a few precious traces, so that the viewer reconstitutes his/her own direction,

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something which I have no desire to impose. As for my *Mes Trophées* [My Trophies], they're definitely about stigmata. All my work is about possession, appropriation, even in the first pieces of *Annette Messager, Collector*. . .



Mes Trophées, 1986–88, mixed media with photograph, two panels, 205×170cm. Courtesy Laage Salomon, Paris.

BM In the idea of collecting, there is also the idea of infinity. Collecting is about always pushing farther out, the limits of a totality. . .

AM Collecting is definitely a way of struggling against death. A collection is always more and more beautiful, bigger and bigger, always incomplete. . .

BM So today you collect body pieces, pieces of images of bodies. We saw this already in the *Chimeras* series in 1982, now with the *Effigies* series of 1985 and above all in *Mes Trophées*, begun in 1986.

AM The trophy is simultaneously on the side of victory and on the side of death, whether they are hunting trophies, the trophies of the Indians. . .

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BM We say that we hang people in effigy. During the French Revolution for instance, they put the heads of the condemned on stakes.

AM Effigies are related to massacres. But what is paradoxical about this is that these people who have had their heads cut off become as effigies, extremely important.

BM We can talk about art as trophies. Isn't it about undoing things, breaking things into pieces? Art is stamped and dated, hung in effigy, and therefore, literally cut off from life.

AM That's why art doesn't at all go the way of life. Art is against life. I think besides, that one shouldn't say too much, show too much, reveal too much. . . Just a few traces, a bit derisory. . . Art is more on the side of conspiracy and conjuration as well. . .

BM These conjurations, like conspiracies, take place mostly at night?

AM I like the excesses of the night. I feel I can be queen of the night. Nothing is in its real scale at night; everything is either very big or very small; everything is vague, everything is false, everything is more intense. The light of day is terrifying to me because it's too "realist." In the day, I am Bunuel's "Belle du Jour", a woman who seems to be without a past but who is very complicated and perturbed. . .

BM Your thinking seems to be very psychoanalytic and at the same time, it isn't at all. It's as if we were watching a production of psychoanalytic stereotypes.

AM It's true that I like clichés. Showing keys, scissors or shoes as I was able to do with *Chimères* is playing with clichés. You could of course, accuse me of being a castrating woman, and people certainly have done so, but I also know that it's about a kind of dime store sadism or fetishism. In the end, it is about false introspection. I like making the viewer a little ashamed, to put him/her in the position of a voyeur caught by surprise. I want the viewer to have the impression of discovering terrible secrets when what is involved is a ridiculous image, even if this image always touches us in the end. My fantasies are like everyone's fantasies!

BM Your interest in sorcery and hysteria has been talked about a great deal.

AM Hysteria is related to both photography and the body. The postures of hysteria are always ecstatic, passionate, theatrical. . . We can talk about Charcot as really the director of hysteria. . . Today these outrageous forms have completely disappeared.

BM We can draw a parallel between this *mise-en-scène* of the female body and your *mise-en-scène* —yours is also a *mise en pièce*, breaking into pieces of a body which more often than not happens to be male.

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AM There is a game played between the photographer and the model. Boys lend themselves more easily to my photographic games than women. It's a new role for them. I comb their hair, I make them up a little, I give them orders, I command them. They are my actors. They expect me to make martyrs of them a little. . . I like excessive, false productions, images framed in black. . .

BM Your work does more than play with the images of psychoanalysis. We should speak now of your art as a sort of geography of the body, an amorous geography.



Detail, *Le Jardin du Tendre*, 1988, Jardin du Centre d'art Contemporain de Castres.

AM We have films about love, we have novels about love, we should have paintings of love.

I draw in the lines of your foot.

I paint in the lines of your mouth.

I make watercolors in your hand.

I sew images in your ear.

I draw a map in your navel. . .

I was very impressed by the *Carte du Tendre* [Map of Tenderness] invented by a woman writer of 17th-century France, Mlle de Scudéry. For some time, I conceived of gardens of “*tendre*” which mix writing and photography with real spaces: the path of reconciliation, the tree of

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shame, the herbs of confidences, the turtle of longevity, the spider of scandal, the route of chance, the maple of dispute, the copse of indiscretion, the timber trees of hope, the oak of kisses, the poppies of confession, the rabbit of fortune, the branches of forgetfulness, the junction of uncertainties, the forest of hesitations, the lake of temptation, the plains of fatigue, the lime tree of rest, the mountain of assiduousness, the passageway of pain, the intersection of ambition, the ramble of emotion, the slope of forgetfulness, the mound of despair. . .

BM Always this idea of joining, marrying traditionally incompatible things.

AM It's true that we could call the combination of painting and photography a bad marriage! I like bric-a-brac, tinkering around, making different genres collide. . . I like being able to refer to Edward Lear and James Ensor without establishing a hierarchy, putting on the same plane William Blake and Walt Disney, comedy and tragedy, the sublime and the tacky. I embroidered myself 150 proverbs about women on little white cloths in 1974, in 1975 I made 200 drawings with rays of color called *Le bonheur illustre* [Happiness illustrated] representing little countryside scenes, mountains, sunsets, etc. . . I like just as much the medieval Apocalypics and fairy tales, Symbolism and photo novels, Gustave Moreau and Alfred Hitchcock, Jacques Demy and Alfred Kubin, Edith Piaf and Lola Montes. . .



Annette Messenger, *Voeux*, 1988, 170×200cm.

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BM It seems that the need of hybridization, melange, cross-breeding, acquired, if we could call it that, from the cultural situation of the late '60's is a little questionable today because of certain positions like Finkelkraut's, for example. It seems that today, there is a return to a certain puritanism, witness the resurgence of so-called conceptual art.

AM In France there isn't conceptual art in the strict sense of the term. The thinking behind melange and hybridization to which you alluded comes to us from May 1968. Conceptual art interested me in the same way as the art of the insane, astrology, and religious art. It's not that the ideologies which these areas perpetuate interest me: they are for me above all else, repertoires of forms. I make fun of sorcery and alchemy even if I make full use of their signs. . .

BM There is a beautiful sentence by Genet about this: "Because she lived among prophecies and signs, she wasn't superstitious." It's obvious besides, that artists today occupy the space of the religious, of magic, without subscribing to all that was once attached to these things.

AM The artist occupies the place of the mischievous little girl who lies dormant in all of us!

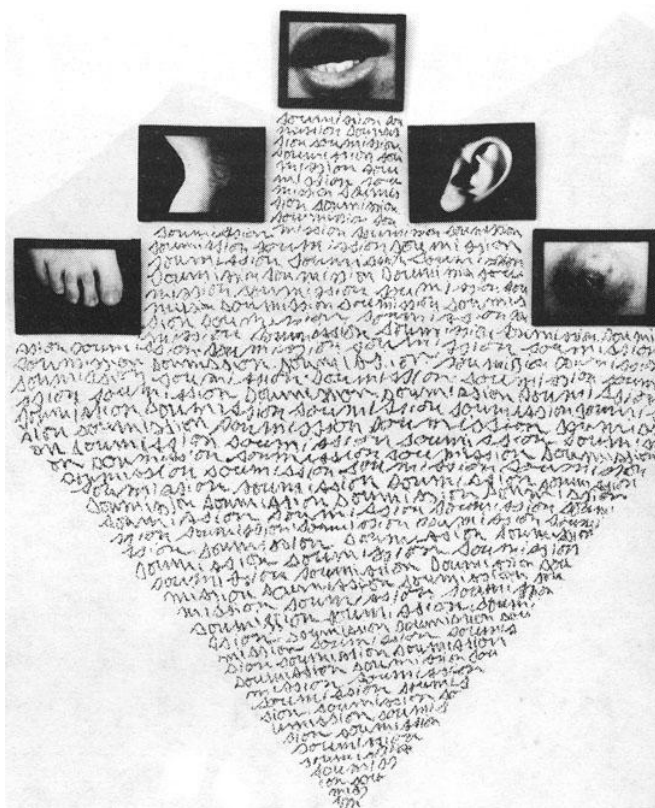
BM There we see clearly Annette Messager's moral concepts! Are the maxims, is writing in general taking on greater and greater importance in your work?

AM At first, I tried to make some pieces with words, like the "*enluminures*". Since I didn't succeed at writing sentences, I repeated the same word, 100, 200 times, to the point where it lost its value. Repeating the word shame a thousand times, writing it on the wall with colored pencils, you end up obliterating the meaning, depreciating it. . . PROMISE PROMISE PROMISE. . . RECONCILIATION RECONCILIATION RECONCILIATION. . . SHAME. . . SHAME. . . SHAME. . . RUPTURE RUPTURE. . . They become incantations. The pencil skates along the wall, taking the form of interlacing figures or arabesques. These repeated words are placed in relation to very small, very black and white pieces of bodies, framed under glass, protected. Nostrils, ears, throats, legs, feet, sexes, hands. . .

These are my "*Ouvrages*". These works have just as much to do with "women's" work as they do with works of art. This can be very grand and very ridiculous at the same time. The "*Lignes de la main*" [Lines of the hand] are kind of like columns or pedestals of words which bring us to an image, they ascend towards the image like a song or a litany. . . These words are written by different people. I don't have to be the only one who writes. I like it when others are compromised. . . it's about, ultimately, offering a word to an image. The image is most often, sticking out from the wall, leaning towards us, tenderly in the manner of 19th-

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century hangings. I am close to certain Indian practices where offerings are made to a statue. We find this idea in my series of *Petites effigies* which are completely ordinary little dolls to which I have attached little photographs and which lie above a pedestal of words. These little ridiculous dolls become as terrifying as certain voodoo dolls.



Mes Ouvrages, 1988, colored crayons and photographs, 60×60 cm.

BM Recently you've even introduced animals in your pieces, turtles, crickets. . .

AM That's not really new. One of my first pieces in 1971 used sparrows. They are things we all know very well, which are with us all the time, but which escape us completely. A turtle is a very familiar animal that children can own. Nevertheless, it is an ancient animal, prehistoric, a very strange reptile with which no relationship outside of awe is possible; the turtle is always, strictly speaking, a truly fabulous animal. At Castres, I stuck a photo of a naked woman on the shell of a turtle. It was my way of paying homage to *Maja desnuda* of Goya. This woman is sort of on a throne and she moves through gardens in this way. At Nevers, I decorated turtles with photos, with gilded paintings, with jewels. . .

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BM In the '70s, you said be wise like an image (*être sage comme une image*). In the '80s, you declared that we shouldn't believe in ghosts but that we should be afraid of them. It seems to be that you are a bit suspicious.

AM The idea that we can conceive of a second level of things is more than suspect. It's like in love: it's hard to love someone while looking at him or her coldly and saying to yourself: in the end, one level, I could love this person, but on another level, this person is an imbecile!

—Bernard Marcade is a poet and essayist who lives and works in Paris.