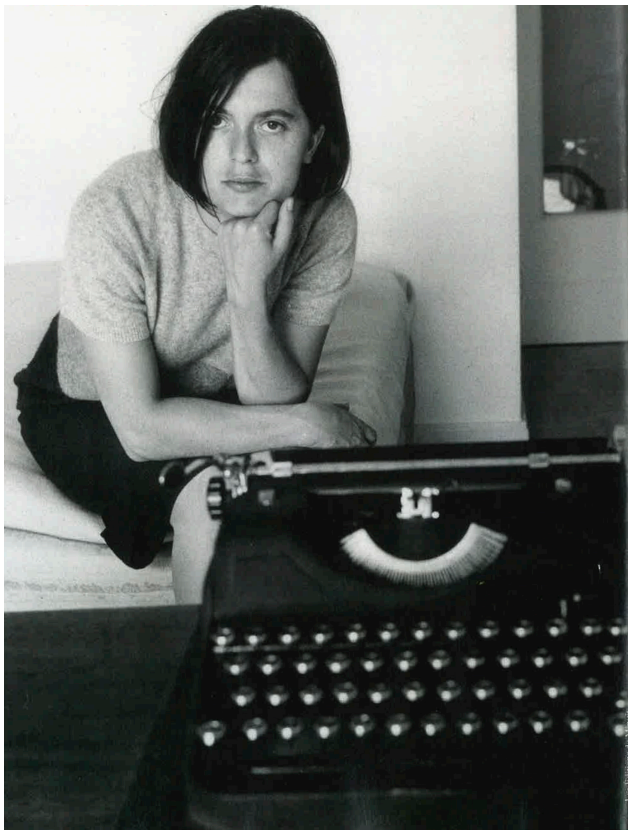


Livres

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DANS L'ARÈNE ENNEMIE by Monique Wittig

A collection of the author's long-unavailable interviews and previously unpublished texts, recalling the subversive power of her writing and the recent history of political and dissident feminism.



In 1964

Monique Wittig, the novelist, theorist and lesbian activist who passed away twenty-one years ago, is more than ever part of the contemporary intellectual and activist landscape. How can we read or reread today the tutelary figure of the Red Dykes of the 1970s, author of the founding texts of "radical lesbianism"? How can we measure the resonance of her novels - L'Opoponax (1964), Les

Guérillères (1969), *Virgile, non* (1985) - and her major essays - *Le Corps lesbien* (1973), *La Pensée straight* (1992)? What is it that still troubles us?

Immersing ourselves in the collection of previously unpublished texts edited and annotated by Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Manton in *Dans l'arène ennemie*, published by her historic publisher (Les Éditions de Minuit), we can't help but be struck by the undiminished power of a thought whose radicalism, contested in its time, still questions our era without ever yielding to common norms and still resisting heteropatriarchy. It's as if she were definitively irreclaimable, and yet so enlightening about what's problematic in gender and class relations of domination. Her commitments have stood the test of time. Better still, they seem to have been revived by the debates we are currently engaged in. Irredeemable - that's how she was regarded by many heterosexual feminists who, apart from her accomplices at the journal *Questions féministes* (Colette Guillaumin, Christine Delphy...), were unable to follow her radicalism to its logical conclusion when she declared, for example, that "lesbians are not women". Woman, "the product of an exploitative relationship", is above all "a political and ideological construct that denies 'women'", she said, rejecting sexual differentiation.

For her, feminism was "an awkward word, not because of the suffragettes" but "because of the 'woman' around which it is built". That's why "lesbianism has nothing to do with feminism". As much as patriarchy divides the world into two genders, matriarchy is equally incapable of conceiving women outside their role as mothers. As she confided to *Actuel Magazine* in January 1974, lesbianism is the only social form through which women can be free: to be a lesbian is "to live by oneself and for oneself, a total independence from the gaze of men, from the shaping of the world they have constructed". And she added: "In this respect, I don't feel at all distant from certain heterosexual girlfriends."

Even if she accompanied the birth of the Women's Liberation Movement (MLF) by coining the slogan "one man in two is a woman", Monique Wittig never ceased to disturb and clash with her enemies, as illustrated by the scathing texts gathered in the aptly named *Dans l'arène ennemie*, hitherto scattered in French (*La Quinzaine littéraire*, *Actuel*, *L'Idiot international*, *Libération*, *Politique Hebdo*...) and foreign (*The Village Voice*...) newspapers and magazines.

Despite her desire to form an international lesbian front in the mid-1970s, she always remained on the margins of militant groups. "I don't feel I belong anywhere," she repeated, lucid about her intellectual extraterritoriality. "Wittig never hesitates to invest the polemical register, as long as it allows the confrontation of points of view and makes new theoretical and political paths possible", observe Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Manton in the preface.

"Words work like truncheons", she felt. To the violence of words heterosexualizing bodies and minds, she ardently opposed that of her own words, believing that "writing must seek to undo and

destroy in order to bring new forms of subjectivity into existence", as Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Manton point out. When she discovered the work of Nathalie Sarraute, she grasped the concrete power of words on bodies. "It's the genius of the century," she confessed to Claire Devarrieux in *Libération*, in June 1999. "I can't think of any writer who can compare with her. She has made known phenomena of living language that no linguist could have brought to light."

From Sarraute to Robbe-Grillet, but also from Gertrude Stein to William Faulkner, her literary admirations inform her theoretical commitments. "There is no such thing as women's literature: you're either a writer or you're not," she says. In literature as in politics, she sought out voices and paths that would secede from the straight viewpoint and established norms. She dreamed of the Amazons, of whom she was certain they had indeed existed and had been "consigned to mythology as anything that might have been a threat to the dominant male society". Already hailed last year by Émilie Notéris in Wittig (*Les Pérégrines*), this revolutionary radicalism haunts *Dans l'arène ennemie*, where Monique Wittig's words, both inflexible and agile, resonate as powerful critiques of the present world.

Jean-Marie Durand