# Fencing doesn't mean war

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1943–45: the war, as seen from Switzerland, a country that was not at war. Germaine Richier made two sculptures of women fencers, both without swords: one with a mask, the other without. Where are they meant to be? Nowhere in particular, but nevertheless within history. Is the fencer standing still before she makes a move, or is she trying to fend off an attacker, perhaps a brutal one? The position of the arms suggests an imminent lunge forward, but the lack of a sword puts a brake on our imagination: there will not be a duel, although there may be a confrontation. Is that why there are two sculptures, one with a mask protecting the face, the other exposed, unmasked? And why is the woman's body naked? This is not about fighting, unless the nakedness of the body and one of the faces has a meaning, or is it merely a provocation? It cannot be the case that the sculpture is unfinished – Germaine Richier never left anything half-done.

She had no fear of paradox – she was merely suggesting an idea that was much needed in the dark days of World War Two; she was not trying to represent a movement but simply to make people think about it, she said. In that case, what is it that we should be thinking about?

How to fight each other without war in such a violent age? Was she depicting confrontation as an awareness of war, in which there was no fear, no attack, and time would stand still? Is this history being made to stand still, to make way for a moment of reflection? Or the affirmation of a political stance that signifies disagreement? The fencer, as she is called, cannot fight, but she is not a pacifist or defeatist. So who is she? The fact that she is female immediately ushers us into an unexpected space.

The fencer is first and foremost an abstraction. Her body is naked and this nudity alerts us to the key role played by the nude female body in the history of art. The nude female body has also served as an allegory for truth throughout the long history of Western aesthetics. The fencer, although connected to this tradition, goes beyond it and also transforms it, by modestly demonstrating that she can attack and/or defend herself, with or without a weapon, with or without a mask. She is therefore primarily an abstraction. Does she represent a position with regard to the current war? The paradox of a 'female fighter' who is both defenceless and determined? What I see in her is an act of audacity.

During the same period, countless artists were making allusions to the war. One of them was Richier's friend Jean Fautrier, who was also taking refuge in Switzerland. By 1945, he had produced

Antoine Bourdelle
*Woman Sculptor at Work*, 1906
Bronze, 50.5 × 34 × 18 cm
Musée Bourdelle, Paris

Germaine Richier
sculpting *The Fencer*, 1943
Photo by Doris Bivetti-Gattiker,
Germaine Richier family archives

Opposite
***Fencer (without Mask)***, 1943
Brown patinated bronze
Foundry: M. Pastori, Geneva
100 × 67 × 36 cm
Kunsthaus Zürich, Zurich,
Dr. H. F. Mayenfisch Collection, 1946

two series: one, *Hostages*, emphasized the hardships of war by only showing heads, while the other presented reclining female nudes in the process of waking. They are sharply contrasted: images of war and images of life. They are nothing like the fencer.

The fencer is not, however, a reflection of Germaine Richier's situation in Switzerland during the war. When I view her as an audacious political abstraction, it is with reference to Virginia Woolf, Richier's contemporary, who can help us to look at and read (or at least 'make people think about') this enigmatic sculpture. In 1938, Woolf anticipated the demands of her democratic brothers in *Three Guineas*. We could see her as somebody who would not take sides in the coming war, but her refusal to engage is more forthright, and far more exacting: she demonstrates that, when done assertively, passivity is an action, particularly under the auspices of the Outsiders' Society. This 'total indifference' (through reason and not instinct, according to Woolf) implies abstaining in the face of demands for her to support the war of resistance. This is an assertive action, rather than simply a refusal to bear arms. Virginia Woolf wished to cooperate while remaining outside … Like the fencer, who is unarmed yet affirmative, on the attack – and surely a potential volunteer for the Outsiders' Society.

However, the fencer may yet have more to tell us, indifferent to combat, yet ready to act. She may recall the woman sculptor captured by Richier's master, Antoine Bourdelle, in 1905, in a statue that depicted his partner Cléo in the act of sculpting. He portrays her holding her body in a similar pose to the fencer, with a hammer held by one hand behind the body, about to strike a chisel held in the other. She is attacking the stone with a dramatic motion and the profile of *Woman Sculptor at Work* allows us to see this in all its power. The profiles of the fencer and the sculptor resemble each other, and their poses bring them closer still. It is easy to imagine Germaine Richier noticing this statue in Antoine Bourdelle's studio – representations of women artists, let alone sculptors, were few and far between in the early 20th century.

Thus, four decades later, the fencer may be a show of support, a demonstration of active resistance against war, *and* a representation of women artists. Could the fencer be a self-portrait? That is my hypothesis, based on the double-sided engagement with the contemporary world that Germaine Richier fearlessly engaged in. She was able to speak of everyday life and the symbolic act of creation at one and the same time.

***Fencer with Mask***, 1945
Dark patinated bronze
Numbered 6/6, foundry: Godard, Paris
105 × 70 × 33 cm
Musée Fabre, Montpellier, purchased by the City of Montpellier, 2006, inv. 2006.19.1