

Can You Feel It?

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Martin Beck, Mathieu Dafflon, Vaginal Davis, Cécile Feilchenfeldt, Yuki Higashino, Ursula Hodel, General Idea, Nan Goldin, Milda Lemberaitė and Amelia Prazak, Manon, Mélodie Mousset, D'Ette Nogle, Hannah Parr and William Wegman

With sections dedicated to magazines and materials by General Idea, Bernadette Corporation, Lutz Bacher, Martin Beck, Bruno Jakob, Wu Tsang and more

Can You Feel It? is an exhibition exploring staging and the staging of others through a variety of approaches be it portraiture, theatricality, private reality, shape-shifting identities, and collective bodies. Some of the works make us ponder about our encouraged culture of spectacle wherein artists have confronted the absurd idea of placing high value on our image with enigma, irony and satire. In the Gaga-Abramović-Kimye age with performative, fabricated (and online) personalities is staging a source of empowerment or rather supporting problematic idolatry and creating oversized egos?

Staging is looked at as an architectural, cultural and social space for identity searching. Featured are positions that relate closely to cultures of the night and DIY culture be it house and dance music havens in New York City, homo-core punk movements in Los Angeles or campy “fake” pageantry contests in Toronto. Our exhibition space as a former illegal techno night club (called Insekt) fittingly acts as a site. We come to see reactionary stances and subversive strategies in the attempt to re-negotiate the politics of representation. The exhibition also lays bare the potentially seducing and the sometimes deviantly violent sides of styling. The power of styling is aptly described by art historian David Joselit: “Styling is the creature of fashion and consumerism not because it is inherently corrupt, but simply because consumerism requires creativity and perpetual change, and that is what styling does – it is dynamic rather than inert... Whether doing business, your hair, or a demonstration, whether doing a magazine or doing art, what matters is your styling.” (Source: *Texte zur Kunst*)

Several positions undermine the authority of norms by confronting them with irony, self-reflexivity or an anti-glamour attitude (General Idea, Parr, Davis, Hodel). Others question the influence of technology on the self and self-care (Lemberaitė, Mousset, Higashino). A handful demonstrate a wish to masquerade with cryptic or apparent layers of personal narratives enmeshed within the work (Manon, Mousset, Wegman, Goldin). Some satisfy our voyeuristic desires and relate to identity linked with a performance for the camera (Goldin, Hodel, Manon). While various positions posit an openness towards others or receptivity towards the ideas behind the exhibition (Beck, Higashino, Nogle). The idea of gender relations spans throughout. And in questioning, curious and distanced ways a masculine presence or celebrated male figures are apparent in various of the works (Goldin, Dafflon, Nogle).

The title of the show *Can You Feel It?* is a 1986 house track by Mr. Fingers which was a trailblazer for the deep house scene. The curators were marked by artist Luis Jacob's commentary on this track: “Intrinsically, we are even ,other‘ to ourselves! Look at our unconscious. Look, even, at the many ,selves‘ we become throughout the course of our lives...The classic house songs are various theses about... togetherness and alienation, created by black and often gay musicians... That is the thesis of house: that house is not a thing, certainly it is not a building, but rather house is a joyous, interpersonal experience.” (Source: *Afterall*)

The Materials Section in the exhibition features video clips, zines, magazines, and publications exploring the crossovers between the fashion industry and the art world and touches on topics such as publicity, the reproduction of luxury culture, being centre stage, style, trash elegance, icy eroticism, glamour, image-making as well the creative and musical legacies of the 70s, 80s and 90s. An example includes an issue of *Avalanche Magazine* (1970-1976) which features General Idea and William Wegman. Other magazines presented are General Idea's *FILE Magazine* (1972–1989) and *Made In USA* (1999–2001) by the New York-based collaborative project Bernadette Corporation. Screened are videos such as Wu Tsang's *Into a Space of Love* (2019) the realist documentary (sponsored by Gucci and

in collaboration with Frieze) exploring the legacies of house music. Projected are previously unshown photographs by Bruno Jakob of Jeff Koons and La Cicciolina with Gran Fury members at the Venice Biennale in 1990. On view is also the artist book *Do You Love Me?* (2012) by Lutz Bacher (1943-2019) which is a print extension of Bacher's video work of the same name, in which she interviews colleagues, friends and family about Bacher "the person" and Bacher "the artist".

Texts on the Works (see exhibition map for work details and bios at the front desk)

Martin Beck (b. in 1963 in Bludenz (Austria), currently living in New York)

Martin Beck's installation *Curtain* (2018) is a cream-pink silk chiffon curtain that with its shifting movement and translucency metaphorically alludes to veiling/unveiling, shared space and interaction. It is a staging of/for others. His ongoing research include investigations into the history of communal living, notably the famous American commune of Drop City; urban queer disco and dance music culture in New York City as a site of collective sociality as well as the impact of modularity in exhibition-making, as exemplified by designer George Nelson. In the materials section Martin Beck's book *Last Night* documents the 118 songs played during a 13-hour NYC set at The Loft by the legendary DJ David Mancuso. The photograph *The Same Thing can be Done in Different Ways* (2014) is a moon image, one of many that the artist has been shooting over the past fifteen years.

Mathieu Dafflon (b. in 1987 in Geneva, currently living in Basel)

In the painting *Les Pieds Sur Terre* (2018) by Mathieu Dafflon we are faced with the portraits of twenty renown male artists such as Donald Judd and Marcel Duchamp. (One is not of an artist, Fedor Emelianenko. Go figure.) Their "staging" is rather unflattering with no necks and somewhat frightful faces. A generation or two of geniuses are hovering in a "sea" of gestural painting, a practice that various of the featured artists have championed.

Vaginal Davis (b. in Los Angeles in 1969, currently living in Berlin)

"To call Vaginal Davis a drag queen hardly does credit to a figure whose career has spanned the worlds of punk rock, indie film, performance art and radical zines, whose oeuvre is studied in academia and whose persona is formed from the often gaga but densely literate ravings of a man whose pseudonym is a kooky homage to his hero, Angela Davis, the radical academic with the criminal past and luxuriant head of hair." (Source: *New York Times*, Guy Trebay, 2004) Two videos *Cholita!* (1995) and *The Last Club Sucker* (1999) display Davis's theatrical creations of *terrorist* drag, one that is radically anti-glamour, comic and at times provocative in nature. For five years and until 1999 Davis hosted the punk rock and performance art Club Sucker in Silverlake Los Angeles. *Cholita!* the Female Menudo is a collaborative musical art project of Vaginal Davis, Alice Bag and Fertile LaToya Jackson.

In the mixed media paintings on found paper Vaginal Davis draws together the threads of a loving homage to the early pioneers of genderqueer identity in the Harlem Renaissance such as Ray Bourbon (1892–1971) and Karyl Norman (1897–1947) both female impersonators and entertainers. They are painted with products and potions strongly linked to the feminine: make up, nail polish, and perfume.

Cécile Feilchenfeldt (b. in Switzerland, currently living in Paris)

Having worked on a knit collaboration for among others Maison Schiaparelli, Swiss textile designer Cécile Feilchenfeldt pushes the limits of what knitwear can be. More sculptural than ready-to-wear Feilchenfeldt's experimental textiles combine luxurious and raw materials, with an unconventional play on volume. Movement is a defining and compositional factor in Feilchenfeldt's creations wherein everything starts with a mesh, a single thread that holds together everything.

Yuki Higashino (b. in 1984 in Shizouka (Japan), currently living in Vienna)

Yuki Higashino is presenting three semi-abstract paintings specially created for the exhibition. His paintings are an ongoing inquiry in understanding what the digital image is doing to our visual culture. One of the paintings is of a lighting system on a dance floor, taken during a party in Vienna where Martin Beck was djing. Another is based on a scan of his notebook and the third is of broken phone screen. Yuki notes: "there is a little narrative throughout the three paintings. You work until quite late, then you go out to dance and blow off steam, drop your phone on the dance floor and notice it's broken the next

morning.” We come to see a delicate correlative „dance“ between personal synergies, the everyday of freelance cultural work and frivolities of the night.

Ursula Hodel (b. in Solothurn, currently living in Zürich)

Two videos by Ursula Hodel feature the artists frantically dressing up in a private self-attentive performance. The compulsive repetitions, motions in reverse and the speediness/slowness of her walk is in contrast to what one usually associates with seductive fashion editorials and polished runway moments. The backdrop of the private home wherein at times she whimsically comes out of the bathtub also breaks away from stylized and socialite WASP life. Ursula Hodel has also previously collaborated with Bernadette Corporation in the 1997 video *Past Life: Egypt* wherein Hodel instructs a submissive partner. When this was shown at the Kunsthaus in 1999 there were complaints of the sexual content.

General Idea (active from 1969 to 1994 between Toronto and New York)

General Idea’s famous self-portrait *P is for Poodle* (1983) features the three central members AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal as suited campy poodles. Why as poodles? „The poodle, because of its effete, banal image, its desire to be preened and groomed for public appearances, was an easy image to occupy... it acted as General Idea’s mannequin for their parading ideas.“ (Source: film commentary in the video *Cornucopia* (1982)).

Nan Goldin (b. in 1953 in Washington D.C., currently living in New York City, Berlin, and Paris)

Nan Goldin’s *Roommate dressed as Napoleon, New Year’s Eve, NYC* (1980) incorporates her most idiosyncratic photographic style, a hybrid between glossy art photography and direct aesthetics of snapshot photography, autobiographical detail and documentary storytelling. Napoleon, the ultimate self-mythologizing figure stands tall in front of a background of still-lives. For over thirty years her subjects have been those closest to her: friends, lovers, transsexuals, cross-dressers, drug users, all people she befriended when she moved to New York after her sister’s suicide. She often refers to them as a family, a community which she chronicled as an act of memoir, protection and a preservation of a scene which could have easily been lost.

Milda Lemberkaitė (b. 1987 in Klaipėda (Lithuania), currently living in London)

Milda Lemberkaitė’s *Bulky* (2019) is part of an ongoing series of sculptures developed out of found branches. This branch is taken from a broken tree in Berlin bred for the ability to absorb pollution. In line with her research on healing and cleansing, Lemberkaitė’s sculptures look at relationships between body and earth. Like rooting bodies, the sculpture is supported by its limbs. Containing synthetic eyelashes and obsidian mirrors with engraved sentences the sculptures allude to the divination quality that obsidian mirrors used to have in Mesoamerican culture as portals to a realm that could be seen but not interacted with. The sculptures also make reference to our contemporary ambivalence with screens and the connection we have with them. The artist notes: “the flat screen is at once mirror; an object to caress, a plane upon which to inscribe one’s innermost secrets and desires or the contemporary doppeleganger for a piece of black obsidian rock.”

Manon (b. in 1940 in Bern, currently living in Zürich)

Manon stages herself in her photographic series *Lady with a Shaved Head* (1977/78) making reference to models from Surrealist photography such as Man Ray’s pictures of Meret Oppenheim. At play here is the construction of the self that deviates from a stereotyped gender identity. It is a body of work that reflects a key turning point in Manon’s practice. In 1977 she moved from Zurich to Paris and produced the 48-photograph series *La Dame au Crâne rasé*. She notes: “In Zurich they were watching me. In Paris, I felt free.” In Switzerland Manon was amongst the first to use staged photography to break away with social norms. Appearing as an androgynous powerful femme fatale Manon plays with our gaze. It is set in both graceful yet also sinister atmospheres. Art historian Jean-Christophe Ammann described Manon as an erotic phantom, zombie, dominatrix, mourner, a sculptor and Pygmalion in one.

Mélodie Mousset (b. in 1981 in Abu Dhabi, currently living in Zürich)

In *Pattern for Hysterical Change* (2017) Mousset shuffles linguistic and perceptive notions. The hands have inhabited different realities. Firstly, imagined as UV maps of a pair of generic hands, they then

were rendered as 3D patterns and finally “printed” as a physical object. The silicone surface with hyperrealistic hand-painted textures emulating veins, freckles, moles and wrinkles is seductively tactile. Following Mousset’s play on the virtual being staged as a physical real she questions human connectivity to the world. John Heartfield’s photomontage *Five Fingers Has The Hand* (1928) comes to mind, the reactionary anti-fascist image of a hand: “What is more powerful than the fingers of the human hand working together.” Mousset’s enigmatic title points to the Alcoholics Anonymous statement “when you’re hysterical, it’s historical” a calming mantra referencing the erratic nature of an Amygdala Hijack, an out of measure emotional response triggered by what is believed as a significant emotional threat. (The word hysteria comes from the Greek hysteria, the word for Uterus). A recomposed self-portrait in the form of wax, *Organs* (2018) are replicas of her organs as they were last seen inside her body resulting from MRI body scans. Staging her self-discovery objects serve as proxy and as surrealist fantasy props: “I wish I could hook my organs up to a mouth. They would speak for themselves.”

D’Ette Nogle (b. in 1974 in La Mirada (CA), currently living in Los Angeles)

Los Angeles based artist D’Ette Nogle has specially re-imagined her work (*The Moment I Realized My Hair Was Getting in the Way of My Art Practice*), (*Unrealized 2007*), *Somewhat Realized (Lighter)*, 2009, (*Exhumed from Suspended Projection*, 2009; *Printed*, 2019) for this exhibition. Originally shown in 2009 as a photograph of herself, this iteration of the work is presented on a bulletin board wherein the installation instruction allowed for the curators to pin other items. Placed are notes on the exhibition as well as print-outs, invites and personal items from friends of Last Tango. With this gesture Nogle astutely incites a participatory action, one that stages the other. When the work was shown in 2009 as part of her self-made retrospective titled *Suspended Projection* which marked the re-start of her visibility in exhibition-making after eight years of non production. “Where Nogle locates liberatory possibility in keeping works almost/not-quite/partially/somewhat realized, she also injects a phenomenal, self-deprecating sense of humour into her art.” (Source: ArtReview, Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer). In D’Ette Nogle’s video *Stand Up* (2019) the artist reenacts Louis C.K. jokes in intimate settings in front of people. Originally presented in a solo exhibition at a storage place the work stages a celebrity’s “voice” who at the time was himself being “stored” and out of view because of his sexual misconduct. D’Ette who in real-life juggles several selves as a high school teacher and artist notes that she had to immerse herself in order to get into character to perform: “I was in that Louis headspace for a while...”

Hannah Parr (b. in 1984 in the United Kingdom, currently living between Berlin, the Dominican Republic and Zürich)

Hannah Parr’s punchy, surreal and whimsical sculpture *Great Hair* (2019) conjures thoughts about gestural painting, hair flicking and hair as a tool. Hannah notes: “Great Hair is the first in a series of work that transforms power tools closely associated with ‘manliness’ into perverse symbols that explore female sexuality and identity. A subtle sensual and surreal power tool made for affirmative hair flipping.”

William Wegman (b. in 1943 in Holyoke (MA), currently living in New York and Maine)

William Wegman’s *Self-portrait* from 1971 was made during the time of his pioneering video days wherein he imagined absurd narratives and filmed himself telling a story in an improvised manner. The tartan bag over Wegman’s head is the same in his video *Airplane Travel* from 1973 wherein there is an illogical proposition of luggage always being empty when one has to pick up one’s luggage at the reclaim area. Known as “the man with the dogs” his staged photography of Weimaraner dogs have appeared in a variety of mainstream platforms such as *Sesame Street* and *Saturday Night Live*.

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