

CAMOUFLAGE

curated by Zdenek Felix

George Condo, Gelatin, Rachel Harrison, Klára Hosnedlová, Mike Kelley, Martin Kippenberger, Kris Lemsalu, Francis Picabia, Pieter Schoolwerth, Anna Uddenberg, Franz West

In times of Corona, which can certainly be met with bitter humor, the festival *Curated by* in September 2021 is dedicated to the topic of *Comedy*. The exhibition contribution *Camouflage* at Meyer Kainer gallery takes up certain subversive and ironic aspects of the late work of Francis Picabia and takes them as the starting point for a specific observation of selected contemporary art positions that defy clear definition. However, the show does not aim to get involved in the current modes of comedy culture as they are constantly appearing in various forms in today's media. Wikipedia does not offer a clear definition of the term "camouflage". In general, it means the use of camouflage patterns in military or fashion, if one disregards the fact that some artists such as Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons had already appropriated the deceptive surfaces for the transformation of objects.

The starting point of the exhibition is a painting by Francis Picabia from the 1940s, which despite its comedy, touches with its intensity and depth. The French painter used a black and white photograph as a template for this "portrait of a stranger", which was shown in a popular men's magazine. The transfer into color gives the motif a strange appearance, as Picabia increases the contrast of light and dark areas, whereby the initial realism of the original is evaporated. By intensifying the colors in the illuminated areas of the black-and-white photo, Picabia gives the colored version of the portrait a strange, auratic appearance, not far removed from the styled depictions of film stars and other social idols. The result is a pastiche of technical and painterly processes, whereby the ironic intention unmistakably remains. The focus of the process is less an interest in art history than a fascination with ambiguity and camouflage.

Concerning the theme of the exhibition, it is noteworthy that Picabia's method of appropriation remained concealed from the public for a long time. The artist hid most of the templates for his figurative pictures, especially the photographs from the erotic magazines that were only published after 1990. Since the majority of his paintings were academic-looking female nudes, and since these paintings were created during the war years, suspicion arose after 1945 that these smooth, sexually laden paintings were veiled concoctions, infected with fascist aesthetics and ideology. The strangely contorted, pseudo-classical poses of the models did the rest to substantiate these misjudgments. Picabia was concerned with the translation of banal, subcultural photos into the field of painting and with putting these kitschy images that he transformed back into circulation using the "recycling process". By being eclectic, he anticipated, without realizing it, certain ideas of postmodernism for which the dogma of the absolutely new has lost its validity. The fact that Picabia kept the subcultural sources of his "Nues" a secret puts him in the forerunners of "Camouflage" - also in the context of this exhibition.

These and other properties of Picabia's image contrast the intention of the theme of *Comedy* as a genre, as in a similar sense, the other, also artificial and hybrid exhibition contributions in *Camouflage*, are dedicated to a complex game of subtle contexts. Regardless of how the intentions of the participating artists are influenced by Picabia's strategies, the tension between the two positions remains stimulating for *Camouflage*.

In this context, it is interesting that the American artist Mike Kelley, born in 1954, a year after Picabia's death, was able to pick up on and continue the strategies of the Frenchman at the beginning of the 1970s. The reasons for this ideal relationship lay mainly in Kelley's conviction that inspiration should not be primarily sought after in the so-called "high culture", but in the sphere of the subculture. He consistently expanded the radius of his activities to include underground and trash phenomena, produced punk music himself and organized performances reminiscent of horror movies. With his installations, in which he often used worn-out children's toys and dolls, he gets under society's skin and shows its collective fears and traumas.

Narrative paintings on loose canvases often played an important role in Kelley's actions. Only few of these accessories have survived. One version of the large-format picture "Wound" was part of a performance at the Artists Space in New York in 1986, during which the artist entered the room through the vertical crack in the canvas. Since the opening is framed in red and its shape is associated with a vagina, the action can be read as an allusion to the "trauma of childbirth". As an inverted sexual symbol and as an object of imagined childishness, "Wound" can evoke deep psychological memories, but at the same time, refers to the spiritual roots of the deconstruction of the iconic "allegory of the cave" by Plato, to which Kelley refers in connection with his examination of the terms "Eros" and "Idea".

Mike Kelley's strategies and ideas are very close to the position of the American artist Rachel Harrison. Her new "collaged sculpture" selected for the show in Vienna is entitled *Sculpture in a Corner*, which relates not only to the name but also to the placement of the work. Since this title refers to the relationship between the sculpture and the surrounding space, it is installed accordingly: in the corner, but facing the wall, avoiding the frontal view. This arrangement hardly allows the audience to walk around the sculpture and prompts them to reflect on the situation of the artwork as part of the environment and architecture. At the same time, Harrison's work is reminiscent of the now iconic sculpture by Martin Kippenberger *Martin ab in die Ecke und schäme dich* (Martin off to the corner and ashamed) from 1989. In response to unfair accusations by a critic, the German artist moved a life-size figure with his own facial features in the corner of the room thus visualizing the "punishment" like back in elementary school.

Harrison's work consists of a base and a folding chair placed on it, a stuccoed bread container and a wig. Numerous streams of color poured over the sculpture serve as a unifying element, an allusion to the "abstract expressionism" that dominated until the 1960s, which is reflected here with humor and irony. Following the suggestion of the artist, the sculpture is presented in such a way that it is situated near Mike Kelley's "Wound", another reference that is characteristic of Harrison's work. Both artistic positions are linked, as Eric Banks put it, by an "uneasy, variegated tension", which is connected, to a haunting critique of the lifestyle and the current situation in American culture.

Art historical and biographical references play a major role in both Mike Kelley's and Rachel Harrison's work. These references can also be found in the small but impressive painting *Untitled (Portrait Gil Funccius)*, 1976, by Martin Kippenberger. We see a man with his hands stretched forward. His facial features are reminiscent of the artist, his eyes fixate on the viewer with raised eyebrows, the teeth are exposed like an attacking animal, preservatives are pulled over the fingers of his right hand. The whole thing seems like camouflage or a scene from a cheap horror film, even if the expression unequivocally conveys irony. It should be noted that the title refers to Gil Funccius, a graphic artist and musician who designed several covers for techno and electronic music albums and who was temporarily in a relationship with Kippenberger. Her name is the Latinized form of the word "fox". It is probably an encrypted biographical metaphor, a volte that is not uncommon for Kippenberger.

A different view of Camouflage as a method offers George Condo's contribution. His semi-abstract picture *Funny Landscape*, 1985, shows the artist's method of deliberately blurring the border between symbolic figuration, comics and abstraction. Since the beginning of the 1980s, Condo, who was previously inspired by Surrealism, painted a series of pictures that he called "expanding canvases". In doing so, he reflected on the idea of Jackson Pollock's "all-over paintings", albeit without their dogmatic interpretation. Abstract and comic forms populate the picture surface without a center and a clear boundary, break the hierarchy of individual parts and form a moving, open field of symbols that communicate with one another. The picture can be read as a musical score or as a "peinture automatique" of surrealist provenance; both components exist here alongside and with one another. *Funny Landscape* is reminiscent of certain paintings by André Masson from the 1940s and 1950s, in which knotted lines create half figurative, half abstract configurations. However, Condo has a large portion of humor with which he knows how to animate and de-ideologize his amorphous forms.

The installative, three-dimensional works by the American Pieter Schoolwerth also move on insecure, hybrid ground. First he was working in Los Angeles, where he came into contact with psychedelic ideas and rituals, after moving to New York he then created figural oil paintings on the subject of landscapes and portraits,

sometimes combined with elements of classic Dutch painting. Later he created multi-layered pictures with people and furniture. In the booklet accompanying his exhibition at the Kunstverein Hannover 2019 one reads: *“Figures emerge from the background like ghosts. Schoolwerth is concerned with the dissolving space, the representation of which that could be imagined and implemented by using image processing programs in the form of overlapping layers, at the latest since the turn of the millennium. The abstraction in the sense of a no longer real, but virtual space, from which people seem to communicate with us over the phone, have become everyday routine for us today.”* Within this complexity, the question of the content of the virtual “reality” arises. Schoolwerth's sculptures / paintings do not give a clear answer, but open up further perspectives by including video games and virtual image communication to examine and deconstruct these channels as parallel worlds.

When human figures appear as virtual animated robots in some of Pieter Schoolwerth's “sculpted paintings”, artificial people appear as avatars in the installations by the Czech artist Klára Hosnedlová. In her installation, reminiscent of a stage set, which is now being shown in Vienna, one sees two figures, one half lying, the other leaning against the wall. They look scary because, despite their almost natural posture, they are headless. They are dressed in a strange, old-fashioned outfit, the shape and style of which alternates between the leather doublet with tied sleeves and the leather suit, usually worn by motorcyclists. They wear old, used stockings and strange fabric breast garments. The recumbent figure appears to be female, the kneeling figure, male, but this, too, is ambiguous. On closer inspection it is noticeable that they, in some places, are infested with fungi or are in the process of examining these overgrown, reddish fungal stems. On the shoulder of the reclining figure one discovers a butterfly, on the floor there are puddles made of transparent plastic as if they were secretions. Are there two researchers looking for pharmaceutically usable organisms or breeders of insects? One has to know that the strange mushrooms are the Chinese “reishi mushrooms”, *“parasites that grow on deciduous trees and look like they are covered with a shiny varnish”* (Wikipedia). They are also called “mushrooms of eternal life” because their extract, carefully dosed, is used to detoxify and cleanse the human organism. In any case, this is less about fictional narratives than it is about hybrid processes that take place between the social needs and natural supplies that are crucial for humans. The work has dystopian features, but deals with utopian problems, and is filled with a deep interest in the relationship between man and nature.

The human body and its functions are at the center of Berlin-based Swedish sculptor Anna Uddenberg's current art production. She studied at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, then switched to the Royal Academy of Liberal Arts in Stockholm and has lived in Berlin since 2011. A major exhibition was held in 2019 at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn. It is a strange work that she produces. At first glance, her current three-dimensional works seem like devices from Frankenstein's laboratory or props from a studio specializing in sado-masochist practices. Uddenberg creates “artificial bodies” out of fiberglass, vinyl, leather and chrome-plated metal, some of which are reminiscent of avant-garde furniture or medical equipment. Women's bodies can be seen, tied in leather straitjackets, which show off their feminine shapes and characteristics in seductive positions. Associations with the erotically charged doll monsters by Hans Bellmer from the 1930s and his no less obsessive photographs emerge involuntarily. But the female fetishes of Louise Bourgeois and Sarah Lucas, built from artificial body fragments, also force themselves as spiritual relatives. The impression of kinship, however, is deceptive. Anna Uddenberg's sculptures are not so much about the sexual connotations, but about the modes that are used in capitalist society to explore femininity as a fetish of perfection and beauty.

One can find out more in the catalog of the exhibition in Bonn: *“Uddenberg exaggerates the female body, and she combines the handmade with the found (ready-made). Her strongly overstretched, seemingly flawless figures offer almost an acrobatic still life and a dense, suspenseful narrative that also questions our completely exaggerated notions of perfection”*. Anna Uddenberg leads the viewer into a laboratory in which new forms of the “intersexual” human image are tested and examined.

Provided that dystopian approaches mix with utopian content in the assemblages by Anna Uddenberg and Klára Hosnedlová, the sensual, physical and life-affirming aspects seem to predominate in the work of Estonian artist Kris Lemsalu. At least at first glance. Lemsalu studied painting in Tallinn and Stockholm, but turned to the medium of ceramics because, according to her admission, she had already enjoyed making things out of clay as a teenager. The sculptor and installation artist, who commutes between Europe and

America, became known for her original assemblages in which she combines various materials, preferably fabrics, clothing, metal and ceramics, to create human figures, each of which is placed in specific situations with different props.

In the Estonian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2019, she showed a monumental installation on the theme of the mythical, omnipotent, primordial mother whose ability to give birth is a prerequisite for the renewal of life. Several enlarged ceramic vulvae, transformed into springs with running water, made a lasting impression on the large audience of the pavilion during a musical performance. Similar to the English sculptor Sarah Lucas, with whom Kris Lemsalu often works and curated the exhibition *Senora* in Vienna in 2020, her works try to *“undermine psychological, social and historical prejudices and are kitschy, scary, sometimes dystopian, but also absurd yet playful”* (Attilia Fattori Franchini). A group of seated and praying figures recently produced by Lemsalu, however, aims in a different direction: these oriental-clad figures with their heads and hands made of ceramic, with multiple eyes on their faces that can see a lot, represent East Asian priests, their prophetic ones Wisdom can stimulate and guide the European, rationally managed imagination. They hide their skills behind luxurious robes and masquerade, but can help and heal.

The four members of the group Gelatin also aspire to have an impact on social reality through artistic interventions. Internationally known beyond Austria's borders, the group, founded in 1993, acts as the “enfant terrible” of the art scene, much loved by young audiences and often attacked by those who feel attacked by the group’s actions. The artists Ali Janka, Wolfgang Gantner, Tobias Urban and Florian Reiter appear collectively as an intellectual community. In numerous often provocative performances, they “adopt the codes of relational aesthetics in their practice and have invented an anarchist and unconventional language and approach. Humor and logic, but also chaotic accuracy, are the key instruments in the conception of new works”, one can read in a statement from Kunsthalle Wien from 2019.

In the *Camouflage* exhibition, Gelatin is presented with some pictures on the theme of the most famous painting in art history: the Mona Lisa. In contrast to countless paraphrases and variations of the notoriously well-known image that have long recognized the value of this work of art down to kitsch and trash, Gelatin deliver a series of reinterpretations in plasticine that do not approach the Mona Lisa phenomenon with awe (which would not be possible with gelatin anyway), but with an enjoyable and humorous thirst for discovery. It does not examine the concept of Leonardo da Vinci's image, nor its art-historical significance or iconographic secrets. What is more interesting is the possibility of translating the iconic motif into one's own language, of deconstructing it with one's own specific means, of making it a Gelatin object. It's interesting to see how variable a familiar motif can be when it is implemented with courage and ingenuity. Behind the disguise as "Outsider Art" a conceptual transformation arises that defies convention and provides a new, playful approach to an idol.

The focal point of the exhibition is Franz West's contribution. In his overall work, the method of camouflaging ideas and concepts plays a prominent role. The exhibition shows painted posters from a larger series that the artist developed for several years and to which he said in an interview: *“I have always wanted to advertise, to attract visitors. And then I just wanted to copy the effect of the picture: depict reality, generate expectations with others and then put something completely different in front of them. Like the advertisement in which you see a couple on the palm beach and then realize that it is an advertisement for margarine”* (Franz West catalog, Autotheater, Museum Ludwig, Cologne 2009/2010). This quote excellently reflects the problem and also the idea of Camouflage as an exhibition and concept, and it should therefore appear as a programmatic epilogue at the end of the accompanying text. Thank you, Franz West, for that!

Text by Zdenek Felix