

JOAN

PRESS RELEASE

Aura Rosenberg: *Head Shots* (1991-1996)
April 30-June 12, 2016

Panel discussion: Sunday, May 1, 1:30pm
Panelists: Rhea Anastas, Adam Marnie, and Aura Rosenberg
Moderator: Alaina Claire Feldman

JOAN is pleased to present an exhibition of Aura Rosenberg's *Head Shots* (1991-1996), a series of sixty-one gelatin silver prints of men seemingly caught at the moment of orgasm. This exhibition marks the twentieth anniversary of the work and the first presentation of the full series since 1996.

For over twenty-five years, Rosenberg has worked across painting, photography, film, and sculpture, frequently addressing representations of sexuality found in pornographic imagery. While earlier works embraced the production of fetish objects made from pages torn directly from porn magazines, in *Head Shots* the artist sought to engage with images of sexualized bodies in ways both more personal and less prescribed. With few exceptions, the photographs are tightly cropped, close-up portraits of their subject's faces. Most scenes are set indoors. A few are outside. Nearly all of the men's eyes are closed, mouths open, and heads tilted back. Several are covered in sweat. In a handful of the images, other bodies enter into the frame as fragments—a toe, ear, hand, or shoulder, and in one case, an ornamentally framed photograph of Liberace. The title of the work serves as a double entendre of sorts—a headshot refers to the close-up portraits used by actors in the casting process, but here suggestively implies the unseen act of ejaculation.

A series of private performances between photographer and subject, the series remains an ambiguous and indeterminate document of Rosenberg's network of artist peers and friends. While Rosenberg took many of the photographs, others were sent to her as negatives, making the creative act, at times, one of conceptualization and selection. In *Head Shots*, the artist plays with and subverts conventions of representation and objectification, replacing the sexualized bodies of women with those of men. Yet, this substitution—of the female body for the male body—is more than an inversion of conventional representations of gender (the woman as the object of a male gaze). It is crucially and provocatively an

imaging of the male body at a moment defined by the loss of control—the literal and metaphorical falling (or coming) to pieces experienced in evacuation. Whether orgasm was experienced or simulated remains not only unknowable but to a large extent, irrelevant. Of more interest is the kind of withholding that the series itself performs, a withholding found in the absence of genitals or of what would be considered explicit or graphic content. This withholding or ambiguity extends to the names of Rosenberg's subjects—each of the individual photographs bears the title *Head Shots* parenthetically followed by the initials of its subject, an indexical gesture that serves to both designate and obscure.

Head Shots was first exhibited in 1996 at Wooster Gardens, New York, and subsequently traveled to Art & Public, Geneva and Galerie Moussion, Paris the same year. Made over a period of six years, the series brackets a historical period that saw the much debated Culture Wars and the de-funding of the National Endowment of the Arts, the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, and perhaps most significantly the death of nearly 350,000 Americans to AIDS-related causes prior to the development of an effective combination of antiretroviral medications in 1996. If the AIDS epidemic is not a subject of the work, it is an implicit and important cultural and historical lens through which to consider a series of photographs depicting the sexualized male body as a site of pleasure. This exhibition provides the occasion to reconsider *Head Shots* and the questions it raises about sexuality, identity, and intimacy, about enactment and visibility, and about the value ambiguity and withholding might offer contemporary critical, feminist aesthetic practices.

In coordination with the twentieth anniversary of *Head Shots*, the exhibition also includes a selection of Rosenberg's personal collection of ephemera related to the project. A book of the series, published in 1995 by Stop Over Press, with short texts by Lynne Tillman, Gary Indiana, and John Miller is available for sale at JOAN.

A panel discussion organized around *Head Shots* will be held at JOAN on Sunday, May 1 at 1:30pm. Panelists include Rhea Anastas, Adam Marnie, and Aura Rosenberg. Moderated by Alaina Claire Feldman.

Aura Rosenberg lives and works in New York and Berlin. Recent solo exhibitions include *Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?*, Meliksetian | Briggs Gallery, Los Angeles (2015) and *I Know It When I See It*, Martos Gallery, New York (2013). Her work has been shown at MoMA PS1, Queens; The Swiss Institute, New York; Yale Union, Portland; JOAN, Los Angeles; ICA Philadelphia; Kiev Biennale, Ukraine; bb3 (Berlin Biennale 3); Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, St. Gallen; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; Salzburger Kunstverein,

Salzburg; and Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, among many others. In the summer of 2015, Rosenberg performed with her band The Cornichons as part of The Venetian Blinds: Artist-run Bands, Palazzo Grassi, Venice. She has published three volumes of photography, *Head Shots* (Stop Over Press), *Berlin Childhood* (Steidl Verlag/D.A.A.D.), and *Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?* (Hatje Cantz Verlag). Rosenberg teaches in the Department of Photography at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn and Departments of Photography and Fine Art at School of Visual Arts, New York.

Rhea Anastas is an art historian and a founding member of Orchard, an experimental, artist-run gallery in the Lower East Side in New York. Anastas has been associate professor in the Art Department at University of California, Irvine since 2014.

Alaina Claire Feldman is a curator and the Director of Exhibitions at Independent Curators International (ICI). Over several years, Feldman has worked with the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir to translate and distribute videos from the collection, culminating in exhibitions at The Kitchen (New York) and SPACE (London). She recently organized the exhibition *The Ocean After Nature* and its subsequent catalogue, which will debut at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco (June 2016) followed by an international tour. She is currently co-editing, along with Jovana Stokic, an anthology on critical feminist curating.

Adam Marnie is an artist living in Los Angeles. Recent exhibitions include *One/Thinking Two/Willing*, Kijidome, Boston, *Construction/Destruction*, Galerie Almine Rech, Paris, and *Rongwrong*, Elaine de Kooning House in East Hampton, NY. In 2015, he organized the group exhibition *Fictions*, Derek Eller Gallery, New York, and co-organized *SYLVIA BATAILLE*, JOAN, Los Angeles. Marnie is publisher and editor-in-chief of F Magazine.