

## *Unselfing*

assume vivid astro focus (avaf), Yael Bartana, Cevdet Ereğ, Ja Jess, Jessy Razafimandimby, David Reiber Otálora, Lillian Schwartz, Yuri Yefanov

### **Dortmunder Kunstverein**

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curated by Rebekka Seubert

The exhibition ‘Unselfing’ lends its title from a term coined in the early 1970ies by the Irish writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) to describe a practice of conscious self-dissolution: the attempt to bring about a relationality going beyond the boundaries of the subjective. For Murdoch ‘unselfing’ is an act of empathy and attention towards one’s own natural and social surroundings and she refers directly to Simone Weil’s similarly applied concept of ‘decentering’. Both terms have older conceptual and religious precursors, such as ‘fana’ (the disappearance of the self in Sufism), ‘Entäußerung’ (renunciation in Christianity), ‘anattā’ (the non-self in Buddhism) or ‘ātman’ (pure consciousness as eternal self in Hinduism). Transferred to current developments in society and with social media turning the self into capital, ‘unselfing’ could mean a form of artistic and personal resistance. Acceleration, multiple crises and the pressures of capitalism with its toxic individualism raise the necessity for a meaningful relationship to the world oriented to love, respect and appreciation –while experiencing a resonating environment and relationality to entities beyond the boundaries of the own body.

The potentials of ‘unselfing’ are explored in the exhibition through newly developed performances, installations, interactive formats, through videos and painting: the possibilities of fluid identities, the dying away of one part of the ego and the transformation of another, feelings of empathy and oneness with the surrounding world – with human beings, other species or nature. From mixed authorship, the dissolution into the collective, to experiences that expand the boundaries of body and mind through meditation, trance, pain or chemical substances, the exhibition attempts to outline the path and condition of self-laterality, empathy and happiness.

Flanking the entrance door of the Kunstverein, the exhibition begins with ‘Les garnitures du Céleste ont chanté, je suis conquis’ (2022), two hay door elements reminiscent of a portal by **Jessy Razafimandimby** (\*1995 in Antananarivo, Madagascar, lives and works in Geneva). By doubling the threshold, the artist emphasizes the visitor's transition from outside to inside, turning the act of entering the exhibition into an act of heightened attention and awareness for the works and thoughts developed within.

The performative and sculptural work of **Ja Jess** (\*1998 in Düsseldorf, currently lives and works in Düsseldorf, Münster and New York) plays with the idea of a ‘self’ in different socially constructed roles that the artist challenges and examines through the lens of structural power relations. Placed at various spots throughout the exhibition, gendered coffin cushions are filled with biodegradable text fragments of Ja Jess and are an invitation to take a seat to read the script about ‘doll’, a female alter ego of the artist who works in a strip club in Düsseldorf. The two sets of silicone masks by Ja Jess were both originally used during performances: the two double faced white masks, ‘Synchronize lies’ (2022) duplicate a head, adding a phantom counterpart, a limply sagging reflection within a ‘conversational body’ of two beings in contact through words. The rubber masks ‘intimacy coordinator I+II’ (2023) were initially a disguise in a video shoot and are designed to be worn between the legs, creating an ambivalent image between facial portrait and fictional genitals.

The larger-than-life moth by **assume vivid astro focus** (avaf, founded in 2001, based in Sao Paulo) & **David Reiber Otálora** (\*1992 in Münster, living and working between Berlin and Bogotá) spreads its wings granting shelter and protection through its presence. Built like a model flying machine it glows softly at night through its reflecting fabric and is based on the physiognomy of the luna moth (actias luna), a moth common in the United States. The moth is the nocturnal sister of the butterfly, for the trans community a symbol of the change of self. The seating below is an invitation to visitors to lose themselves in the moth’s eyespots and the feeling of transposed scales... or use the listening station with a

dialogue between Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) & Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) exploring questions of change, desire and perfection, of the self and unselfing as a moment of heightened attention or emptiness.

Challenging the reflection on scale and the way it relates one's own body to the world, the work 'SSS – Sahil Sanesi Sesi / Shore Scene Sountrack – Themes and Variations for carpet' (2007/24) by **Cevdet Erek** (\*1974 in Istanbul, lives and works in Istanbul) swaps the scale of a human body and the sea: 'SSS' is an interactive project in which visitors can imitate the sound of the shore through particular hand movements on the carpet. This personal generation of the sound of the sea creates an interaction between an aural experience and memory. The booklet is a guide to the preparation and performance of the Shore Scene Soundtrack. 'If It = Shore and if we want to obtain You = It then we need Shore = You. Or, become what you are imitating.' (SSS, p. 17). Ssssssssss.

In a second body of work, **Jessy Razafimandimby** explores the figure of the companion (lat. 'companis': the one with whom you share bread). Here, engaging with one another turns into a game with perspectives and sizes: the textile reaction to the architecture creates a theatrical staging mediating between the private and the public – and a backdrop for opening a dialogue with the paintings. This dialogue is challenged by the miniature exhibition of straw objects presented in the doghouse and to be viewed on all fours. Jessy Razafimandimby's work is not only characterized by an interest in interiors and their décor, but the artist also deeply explores the possibility of connection with the "other" – referencing the idea of kinship by the American philosopher Donna Haraway that she extends beyond the boundaries of species and objects.

This thought also reflects in Columbian German artist **David Reiber Otálora**'s 'Prototypes' (2023-24) – bird feeders, shelters and insect hotels for different animal species recently discovered on Colombian territory in a previously inaccessible region, that was only opened to researchers following the peace treaty with the FARC rebels. The built form of these sculptures corresponds with the shape and needs of the animal body, its right to opacity, to hide and remain undetected. Reiber Otálora's new publication released along the exhibition provides an insight into a world in which humans engage with the interactive and creative potential of insects and birds.

The audio piece by **Yuri Yefanov** (\*1990 in Zaporizhzhya, UKR) takes intersubjective relationality to the level of communication and is the documentation of an open-air workshop on sound-based language at the land-art project Mohrytsia (UKR). According to the French philosopher Bruno Latour, concern for the environment begins when there is no longer an 'environment'. Instead of the murmur of rivers, the buzzing of bees, the roar of bison, etc., Yuri Yefanov proposes to consider the voices of humans as the sounds of the environment, thus eliminating the supposed dichotomy between humans and the environment, in which the environment is thought of as the space of the non-human. The audio piece documents the situational solutions that arise from a process of a collectively created new, improvised, temporary language.

The early 1970ies films of CGI-pioneer **Lillian Schwartz** (\*1927 in Cincinnati, Ohio, US, lives in New York City) are both an example of the creative potentials of woman-computer kinship and pointing towards the transcendental and psychedelic aspects of exploring the idea of 'unselfing' in this exhibition. Accompanied by early Moog synthesizer sounds, this selection of early films are like a psychedelic journey, a fantastic explosion of colour and energy. As a guest artist at the Bell Laboratories technological research centre (1968–2002) she explored the possibilities of new technologies that enabled the generation of completely new abstract visual worlds with their completely new language. Hitherto unseen, colour-intensive videos with fast cuts still make a physical impact on the viewers.

In 'Pardes (Orchard)' (2014) **Yael Bartana** (\*1970 in Israel, lives and works in Berlin and Amsterdam) accompanies Michael, an artist friend from Israel, on a journey to the Brazilian Amazon. Under the supervision of Dona Francisca, who is part of Santo Daime, a syncretic religious movement founded in Brazil in the 1930ies, Michael undergoes an ayahuasca ritual. The film shows the shared intake of the

psychedelic drink, which on the one hand opens up spiritual insights into the universe, connecting deeply with nature, but may also lead to the worst trip experiences. While critically reflecting on how Westerners seek personal enlightenment by appropriating traditional rituals, the film also documents an encounter, reflecting on trust and the desire to obtain deeper insights and immerse oneself in one's own being.

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