

The solo exhibition on the upper floor of the Kunstverein's gallery space in Hamburg is the first comprehensive show in Germany devoted to the work of the Austrian artist Kiki Kogelnik (1935-1997). It represents the continuation of a series showing proto-feminist art from the time and artistic context of Pop Art, which the Kunstverein began in 2011 with a solo exhibition of work by Evelyne Axell (1935- 1972).

Kogelnik began her artistic career in Vienna and later moved to New York. Her early works were abstract, but she soon rejected gestural abstraction and took the saying "art comes from artificial" as her maxim. She turned to contemporary themes and experimented with a wide range of materials and techniques, including painting, sculpture, screen printing, and collage. She used sculpture as an extension of painting at times, and used both soft and hard materials such as glass and ceramics for her sculptures. Perhaps this element of playing freely with various media and styles can be explained by the fact that as a woman, she was less encumbered by tradition – since women basically had no real art historical tradition to call their own – than many of her male counterparts and was basically free to start with a clean slate.

There has been increasing interest in women artists from the 1960s, 70s and 80s in recent years, not least because their work frequently defies easy categorisation – Kogelnik being a prime example. This growing interest is reflected in a number of exhibitions devoted to women artists from this period that seek to reassess their work from a 21st-century perspective and uncover certain "blind spots". Due to the specific situation and difficulties female artists faced – foremost among them being reduced to their gender, whether explicitly or implicitly – much of their work can be seen in the context of the Women's Liberation Movement, an aspect that has been largely ignored by art historiography so far.

The female body, the world of fashion with its element of disguise and the unnatural poses typically found in glossy magazines, and the increasing domination of technology and mechanical processes over mankind are recurring themes in Kogelnik's work. Her cut-outs – initially of paper, later as vinyl "hangings" – strikingly illustrate this reduction of humanity. The appealingly soft, fluid shapes of the vinyl hangings belie a certain underlying violence that becomes apparent only at second glance: Many of them are lying on the "floor" where they are stepped on, or hang limply from clothes racks. This violence is also symbolised by another recurring motif in Kogelnik's work: scissors. Sometimes they slash female forms, at others they themselves break – and sometimes they are wielded by women as outsize tools. But Kogelnik's "toolbox" also features less typically female components such as hammers, bolts, and screws, all of which she isolates and renders abstract using the methods characteristic of Pop Art.

In this comprehensive exhibition focusing on a particularly influential period of Kogelnik's oeuvre, the Kunstverein in Hamburg aims to show how this unusual artist succeeded, time and again, in coming up with new means of artistic expression while always maintaining her independent and compellingly consistent position.

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