

# curated by

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## **Untold Narratives**

**13.09. - 19.10.2023**

**Galerie Elisabeth & Klaus Thoman**

**curated by Marika Kuźmicz**

Artists: Geta Brătescu, Paweł Kwiek, Barbara Kozłowska, Jürgen Klauke, Krzysztof Niemczyk, Edita Schubert

## **You Will Hear When You See Me**

Sometimes if a story from the past needs to be told, it will find its own way to reach the present, to resonate with our here and now. But stories need to be persistently sought out, their linearity reconstructed, the paradoxes they contain heard, to find an audience, to be known, sometimes for the first time, even though years may have passed since they happened. All this time, the story may have remained silent, only to suddenly find itself, appear, be heard, change something just by having happened.

Stories have their protagonists, and to really tell their story, you must see them. Only then will the words form a narrative, and resonate. Perhaps this is why the creation of self-portraits has so often become a gesture of emancipation, of making one's presence known and telling one's own story. This has played, and revealed, a special role in the art history of women, who for centuries were deprived of the opportunity to study in academies, so that often their own face and body was the only model available to them. Creating self-portraits was and is also a key way for them to express their sexual identity, which could not resonate due to social restrictions.

*You Will Hear When You See Me* is an exhibition of self-portraits created in various Central and Eastern European countries in the 1960s and 1970s, inspired not so much by a desire for self-memory as to build and mark the artist's place in a particular context, and through this gesture, to loosen the norms and rules that created it. By marking their presence, by documenting it, by the brute fact of recording their being, artists from this part of the world defined, built and constructed their subjectivity. In the creative process they often had to face the mechanisms of censorship, sometimes in a milder form, but sometimes they worked in the context

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of an extremely oppressive regime, where even the mere painting of their own image could become grounds for persecution.

Such was the case with one of Romania's most important artists, Geta Brătescu. Self-portraiture holds a special place in her work. Brătescu examined life under the totalitarian regime in communist Romania, posing questions of identity, self-censorship and private spheres to reflect the widespread repression and the artistic ban on deviation from official state lines.

Her work focused heavily on the contradiction between the official state artistic direction, which rejected and punished any aesthetics questioning the regime, and the haven of private studios, where artists managed to evade censorship. Brătescu explored this reality in a collage of self-portraits called Censored Self-Portrait. The artist's face covered by collage strips drawing attention to her mouth and eyes is a silent but effective testament to the stifling political environment of communist Romania.

Literal performative actions using both the self-portrait and the medium of painting were realized by Croatian artist Edita Schubert. Her work with the canvas consisted not only of painting it, but above all of cutting it. In some works, through the cut slits, we can see fragments of Schubert's body, a female artist attempting to transcend not only the limits of the medium, but perhaps also the limits of the male-dominated art world.

On the other hand, Barbara Kozłowska, a Polish artist who executed her performance piece Border Line over several decades, marked and documented her presence on the beaches of the world. Behind the action was the conceptual idea of drawing a line across the entire earth, all the way to the moon, but in essence it can be read as a gesture of freedom, another challenge to an oppressive state that restricted its citizens' ability to move freely. An additional aspect of Kozłowska's work was her creation of different versions of her biography, which she distributed through her mail art or exhibited together with her documentation from Border Line.

Another sort of challenge to the system is Video A, a "partial" self-portrait by Paweł Kwiek, one of the first video works made in this part of Europe, created in the studio of a state TV station, where it was also broadcast in 1975. At the same time, Kwiek reveals to viewers the mechanism of image manipulation, and defines his position in relation to others and in relation to the space and the cameras recording him.

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The creation of photographic and painterly self-portraits was the domain of the Polish artist, outsider, performer and writer Krzysztof Niemczyk, who developed an alter-ego, the female character the Courtesan referenced in the title of his novel *The Courtesan and the Chicks*, or *a Crooked Mirror of Passionate Action*, or *A Study of Chaos*. While he was writing the book, he painted androgynous self-portraits and also applied makeup to himself for the purpose of creating photographs, which together with the oil paintings were a kind of visualization of the Courtesan. Most of the oeuvre of Niemczyk, who was persecuted among other reasons due to his sexual orientation, was destroyed by the secret police. Like the German artist Jürgen Klauke, Niemczyk challenged the explicitness of sexual orientation. With his own self-portraits, Klauke operated on the boundary of gender identity, polemicizing against the social imperative to define that identity. All of these attitudes do not exhaust the possibilities of using self-portraiture on the path to personal and artistic emancipation, but they do provide a good starting point on the subject.

Self-portraiture is one of the most vital tools for exploring identity, including gender identity, and telling a story, as German artist Jürgen Klauke does. His photographic self-portraits created over several decades are a story of how fluid gender identification is. The next step in the creation of self-images is photographs of his own body taken with an X-ray machine. This self-photographic visual narrative by Klauke throws down a gauntlet to societies that categorize and label, and have recurring and renewed problems with individuals who defy categorization.

All the stories presented in the exhibition are stories from the past, found in the archives, rescued from past time and oblivion. They can serve as a touchstone for our struggle with the complexity of everyday life and identity, and raise crucial questions.