



CHARLIE STEIN

Study for a Museum Display



DREI ANMERKUNGEN ZU CHARLIE STEINS
»STUDIE FÜR EINE MUSEUMSARCHITEKTUR«
THREE REMARKS ON CHARLIE STEIN'S
»STUDY FOR A MUSEUM DISPLAY«

VILLA MERKEL, ESSLINGEN, 2017

Thomas Girst

I

Die Gemälde der Künstlerin Charlie Stein sind nicht zuletzt der Selfiekultur geschuldet, der Inszenierung des Individuums in den sozialen Netzwerken. »To live is also to pose«⁽¹⁾ beschrieb Susan Sontag den Drang der Selbstdarstellung, den Isabelle Graw als »pressure to perform oneself«⁽²⁾ mit dem Hinweis auf die Spuren all dessen entlarvte, was dabei eben nicht unmittelbar sichtbar werden soll: »What remains hidden is their fears: the fear of losing one's social position, the fear of not succeeding, the fear of an unpredictable, insecure future and the fear that someone might discover that we are not that competent after all«⁽³⁾. Die Scham des Betrachters beim Betrachten der knapp dreißig für die Ausstellung »Study for a Museum Display« entstandenen Porträts ist auch ihrer Unmittelbarkeit geschuldet, liegen ihrem Entstehungsprozess doch allesamt digital bearbeitete Collagen von Selbstbildnissen der Künstlerin zugrunde, die nun ihrerseits im tradierten Medium der Ölmalerei im Salonraum eines Salonsettings posieren.

Ein Salon, der gleichsam durch Steins filigrane skulpturale Interventionen »Trap« und »Booby Trap« vermint ist – bedeutet Letzteres doch nichts anderes als *Sprengfalle*. Und findet hier nicht gleichsam ein Krieg statt, inmitten der rot und blau übermalten Wände, entlang der von Stein selbst entworfenen Tapete einer abstrahierten Explosion des Weiblichen? Ist es nicht eben jenes Weibliche, das uns den kontemplativen Blick auf die Zurschaustellung von Porträts junger Frauen verweigert? »Booby« verweist eben auch auf »Boobs« (Brüste) und zu nichts anderem sind

I

At first glance Charlie Stein's paintings hail from the context of Selfie Culture, the staging of the individual in social networks. »To live is also to pose«⁽¹⁾ is how Susan Sontag described the urge for self-expression which Isabelle Graw exposed as the »pressure to perform oneself«⁽²⁾ by pointing to the traces of everything that was not supposed to be immediately visible: »What remains hidden is their fears: the fear of losing one's social position, the fear of not succeeding, the fear of an unpredictable, insecure future and the fear that someone might discover that we are not competent after all«⁽³⁾. The viewer's somewhat shameful wariness when looking at the almost thirty portraits executed for the exhibition »Study for a Museum Display« also hails from their striking immediacy, since all of them originated from digitally edited collages of self-portraits of the artist herself, which are now posing in the traditional medium of oil painting, in the safe zone of a salon setting.

A salon that is mined by Stein's filigree sculptural interventions »Trap« and »Booby Trap«. And is it not a war that is happening amidst the red and blue painted walls, alongside the self-designed wallpaper of an abstracted explosion of the femininity? Isn't it exactly this idea of femininity, which refuses us an ostentative contemplation of portraits of young women? »Booby« of course also refers to the female breast—and indeed the brass rods of »Booby Trap« are monumentally bent into the shape of a female breast.

The lascivious poses of classical painting are only vaguely suggested in Stein's

die Messingstäbe von »Booby Trap« monumental zurecht gebogen. Die lasziven Posen tradiert Malerei sind in Steins Gemälden nur noch zu erahnen. Als Zitat führen sie eine Reduzierung darauf gleichsam ad absurdum. Das Auge findet keine Ruhe; einer sinnlichen Erhöhung verweigert sich jedwedes Porträt. Die Verletzlichkeit der Dargestellten wird zur Verletzlichkeit des Betrachters in Anbetracht der Selbstentblößung der Antlitze, die in ihren Übermalungen, Verzerrungen und Ausparungen nicht selten an die zerfetzten Gesichter in Ernst Friedrichs Buch »Krieg dem Kriege« (1924) erinnern. Die meisten von Steins Porträts schauen den Betrachter an, sie schauen zurück als wüssten sie um unsere eigenen vergeblichen Bemühungen der Selbstinszenierung in digitalen Medien. Mit Sontags Bemerkung zu Goyas »Los Desastres de la Guerra« ließe sich argumentieren, dass Steins Bilder als Kunstwerke tatsächlich etwas aufzeigen, was Kunstwerken zugrunde liegende Fotos oder Filme immer nur zu repräsentieren behaupten können⁽⁴⁾. Steins Porträts werden damit anders als ihre unmittelbaren Vorlagen zu schonungslosen Porträts Versehrter. Allein Gelassene in den intimsten Momenten ihrer Wut, ihrer Angst, ihrem Zweifel, ihrer Verletzlichkeit, ihrer zum Scheitern verurteilten Versuchen der Selbsterhöhung, ihrem erwachenden Wissen um die eigene Vergänglichkeit. Womit die Gemälde von Steins »Study for a Museum Display« wie ganz nebenbei der figürlichen Malerei auch ihre Daseinsberechtigung wieder zurückzuerstatten vermögen. Denn flüchtig wie Snapchat ist mitnichten all das, was sich auf Leinwand gebannt präsentiert.

II

Stein selbst hat ihre Gemälde einmal als Armee bezeichnet, die keiner Banner mehr bedarf.⁽⁵⁾ Gemälde also, die sich befreit haben von kunsthistorischen Koordinaten, auf die sie nur noch subtil rekurren, derer es für die Rezeption nicht mehr notwendigerweise bedarf. Die Giganten, auf deren Schultern man als Künstler steht und um die eigene Daseinsberechtigung ringt, erlauben ihrer eingedenk kein Hadern, keine andächtige Schockstarre.

paintings, rendering absurd any attempt to reduce them to the aforementioned content. The eye finds no peace; the portraits refuse any sensual elevation. The vulnerability of the sitter becomes the vulnerability of the viewer in light of the act of self-denudation of the depicted countenances, which often evoke in their overpaintings, distortions and recesses the tattered faces in Ernst Friedrich's book »Krieg dem Kriege« (War Against War, 1924). Most of Stein's portraits look at the viewer, returning their gaze as if aware of their own futile attempts at self-presentation in digital media. In line with Sontag's view of Goya's »Los Desastres de la Guerra« (The Disasters of War), one could argue that Stein's paintings as artworks actually render visible something more than photographs and films are able to represent⁽⁴⁾. Stein's portraits, unlike their immediate references, thus become unsparring portraits of invalids. Left alone in their most intimate moments of anger, fear, doubt, vulnerability, doomed attempts of self-exaltation and their awakening knowledge of their own transience. As an effortless side effect, the paintings of Stein's »Study for a Museum Display« reconstitute the *raison d'être* for figurative painting. Snapchat's fleeting imagery has nothing to do with what oil on canvas has to offer.

II

Stein herself once described her paintings as »an army that no longer requires any banners«⁽⁵⁾—paintings that have liberated themselves from art-historical coordinates, to which they only subtly recur, coordinates which are no longer necessarily needed for their reception. The giants, on whose shoulders she stands as a painter, battling for her own existence, don't allow for any sort of hesitation or devout paralysis. Recognition yes, admiration no. There lies something pure and immersive, something humble in this approach, which does not attempt to compete with one's predecessors but is instead asserted via the appreciation of the same mastery and knowledge as a part of one's responsibility to one's own work. After all, it is precisely these same ancestors which live on

(1) Susan Sontag, »The Photographs Are Us«, in: The New York Times Magazine, May 23, 2004 (Section 6), 24 – 29, 42, 42.
(2) Isabelle Graw, in: Thomas Girst und Magnus Resch (Hg.), 100 Secrets of the Art World, S. 51.
(3) Ibid., S. 52.

(1) Susan Sontag, »The Photographs Are Us«, in: The New York Times Magazine, May 23, 2004 (Section 6), pp. 24–29, 42, 42.
(2) Isabelle Graw, in: Thomas Girst und Magnus Resch (eds.), 100 Secrets of the Art World, p. 51.
(3) Ibid., p. 52.

(4) Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, New York: Penguin, 2003, S. 42.
(5) Charlie Stein im Gespräch mit dem Autor, New York, 5. Mai 2017.

(4) Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, New York: Penguin, 2003, p. 42.
(5) Charlie Stein, in conversation with the author, New York, 5 May 2017.

Anerkennung ja, Bewunderung nein. Es liegt etwas Reines und Immersives, etwas Demütiges in diesem Ansatz, der sich nicht an den Ahnen misst aber in Wertschätzung derselben Könnerschaft und Wissen in Verantwortung dem eigenen Schaffen gegenüber als unabdingbar formuliert. Schließlich sind es ebendiese Ahnen, die durch das eigene Tun in einem fortwirken und dadurch jene Visibilität erhalten, ohne die sie selber wirkungslos blieben. Etwa Goya, Bacon und Bourgeois. Oder die multiplen Überschneidungen aus Picabias Gemäldefolge der »Transparences«. Aus zwei Köpfen von Steins »Triptych (Red)« ragen zudem die Ohren von Picasso und Proust. Und das großformatige »Portrait (with Faun Ears and Purple Haze)« weist nicht zufällig dieselben Masse auf wie Gustave Moreaus »Tyrteé chantant pendant le combat« (1860), das Gemälde des Symbolisten über den mit göttlichen Kräften ausgestatteten Dichter. Es war Moreau, der Frankreich sein Pariser Atelier als Museum hinterließ, in dem sich noch heute die Wirkungsmacht des Malers nach dessen eigenem Willen voll entfalten kann. Der ideale Ort für die Begegnung und Erfahrung von Steins Kunst ist gleichfalls das Museum – als Heimat, als Zuhause und als Nest. Die Vision der Künstlerin, die sich in »Study for a Museum Display« am Rothko Room der Tate ebenso wie an der lichtdurchfluteten, hochgotischen Palastkapelle Sainte-Chapelle orientiert, überlässt aller widrigen Umstände zum Trotz auch hier nichts dem Zufall.

III

Als Malerin bedient Stein nur eine Facette ihres Wirkens. So wie sie selber als nicht selten weltweit agierende Künstlerin geographisch kaum zu verorten ist, so ist sie fernab aller Beliebtheit in zahlreichen weiteren Genres tätig, die ihren breiten Wirkungsbereich nie vollends abzustecken vermögen: Skulptur, Performance, Architektur, Zeichnung, Film- und Medienkunst, Fotografie, dazu ihre Tätigkeit als kuratorische Arbeit sowie zahlreiche kollaborative Projekte. Was sich in allen Arbeiten von Charlie Stein die Bahn bricht ist weniger ein Kunstwollen denn die

through one's own work and actions, only thereby gaining the visibility without which they would be rendered ineffective—such as Goya, Bacon and Bourgeois. Or the multiple overlaps from Picabia's »Transparences« series of paintings. From two of the heads of Stein's »Triptych (red)« protrude the ears of Picasso and Proust. And it is not by chance that the large-scale »Portrait (with Faun Ears and Purple Haze)« has the same measurements as Gustave Moreau's monumental painting »Tyrteé chantant pendant le combat« (Tyrtaeus Singing While Fighting) (1860)—the Symbolist's painting of the poet endowed with divine powers. It was Moreau who bequeathed to France his Parisian studio as a museum, where today the artist's vision continues to fully unfold according to his very own will. The ideal place for the encounter and experience of Stein's art is also the museum—as a home, a house, and a nesting place. The artist's vision in »Study for a Museum Display«, which takes cues from the Tate's Rothko Room as well as the light-flooded Gothic palace chapel of Sainte-Chapelle, leaves nothing to chance, despite all adverse conditions typical for such endeavors.

III

When painting, Stein is only making use of one facet of her practice. Just as she herself—as a globally engaged artist—is hard to track down geographically she is active in numerous other genres which never fail to fully define her broad fields of interest: sculpture, performance, architecture, drawing, film, media art, photography, curatorial work as well as numerous collaborative projects. What forges ahead in all of Charlie Stein's works is less *Kunstwollen* than the inevitability of an ambition that seeks to manifest itself exclusively in the context of art—especially because her works negotiate questions of identity and femininity, and oftentimes invite a critique about consumerism and society—politically motivated as they seem to be on the basis of sociological reflection. An insight of sorts towards the concept the self-understanding of Stein's oeuvre may

Unausweichlichkeit einer Ambition, die sich ausschliesslich im Kunstkontext manifestieren will – auch und gerade weil ihre Werke Fragen von Identität und Weiblichkeit verhandeln oder oftmals aus soziologischen Überlegungen heraus konsum- und gesellschaftskritisch sowie politisch motiviert sind. Aufschlussreich hinsichtlich des Selbstverständnisses von Steins Schaffen mag eine Beobachtung aus Prousts »Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit« sein, die die Künstlerin im Rahmen einer Lesung zum Abschluss ihrer Ausstellung in der Villa Merkel Ende November 2017 in Esslingen auswählte: »Was das innere Buch der unbekanntenen Zeichen betraf [...] so bestand diese Lektüre in einem Schöpfungsakt [...] Wieviele wenden sich daher denn auch vom Schreiben ab! Wie viele Verpflichtungen nimmt man nicht auf sich, um gerade dieser einen zu entrinnen? Jedes Ereignis [...] hatte den Schriftstellern andere Entschuldigungen geliefert, um nur jenes Buch nicht entziffern zu müssen [...] sie hatten keine Zeit, an die Literatur zu denken. Doch das waren nur Ausflüchte [...] Das Gefühl nämlich diktiert die Pflicht, der Verstand aber liefert die Vorwände, sich ihr zu entziehen. Nur gelten in der Kunst keine Entschuldigungen, Absichten zählen in ihr nicht; in jedem Augenblick muss der Künstler auf sein Gefühl lauschen, daher aber nun ist die Kunst das Wirklichste, was es gibt, die strengste Schule und das wahre jüngste Gericht«⁽⁶⁾. Steins Arbeiten sind Zeugnisse dieser Auffassung, sie stellen sich dem Innersten und verleihen ihm Ausdruck wie Form. Hier wird im Tiefsten Wissen geboren und keine Information – einem »Taucher mit seiner Sonde«⁽⁷⁾ gleich, wie Proust schreibt. Hier löst sich die Dichotomie von abstraktem Konzept und dessen figurlicher Erlösung auf. Eingedenk des Vorwurfs eines rein um sich selbst drehenden Narzissmus, der gleichwohl das eigene Scheitern fortwährend antizipiert. Nur dergestalt, nur in dieser Aufrichtigkeit ist Erkenntnisgewinn ebenso für den Betrachter möglich. Man weiß um seine Wunde, man stellt sie nur nicht mehr zur Schau. Es ist vielmehr das Schaffen, das sich aus ihr speist.

be an observation from Proust's »À la recherche du temps perdu« (In Search of Lost Time) (1913–1922) which the artist selected for a reading at the close of her exhibition at Villa Merkel in Esslingen in November 2017: »That book of unknown signs within me [...] for its reading consists in an act of creation [...] And how many turn away from writing it, how many tasks will one not assume make to avoid that one! Every event [...] furnished excuses to writers for not deciphering that book [...] they had no time to think of literature. But those were only excuses [...] For it is instinct which dictates duty and intelligence which offers pretexts for avoiding it. But excuses do not exist in art, intentions do not count there, the artist must at all times follow his instinct, which makes art the most real thing, the most austere school in life and the true last judgment.«⁽⁶⁾ Stein's works are testimonies to this idea, they confront the innermost and release it into expression and form. Here, out of the deep, knowledge is salvaged and not mere information—equal to »a diver sounding«,⁽⁷⁾ as Proust writes. Here the dichotomy of abstract concept and its figurative salvation dissolves. Aware of the reproach of a narcissism that solely revolves around itself, yet nonetheless is constantly anticipating one's own failure. Only thus, with utmost sincerity, a gain in knowledge is also possible for the onlooker. One knows about one's own wound, not merely exposes it. What is important is the act of creation feeding from it.

(6) Marcel Proust, *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit*, Bd. VII, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2011, S. 274 f.
(7) Ibid. S.273.

(6) Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Time Regained*, Adelaide: eBooks@Adelaide, 2014, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/proust/marcel/p96t/chapter3.html>, accessed January 10th, 2018.
(7) Ibid.



A Aufnahme im Atelier des Herrenhauses Edenkoben, Selbstportrait 2017

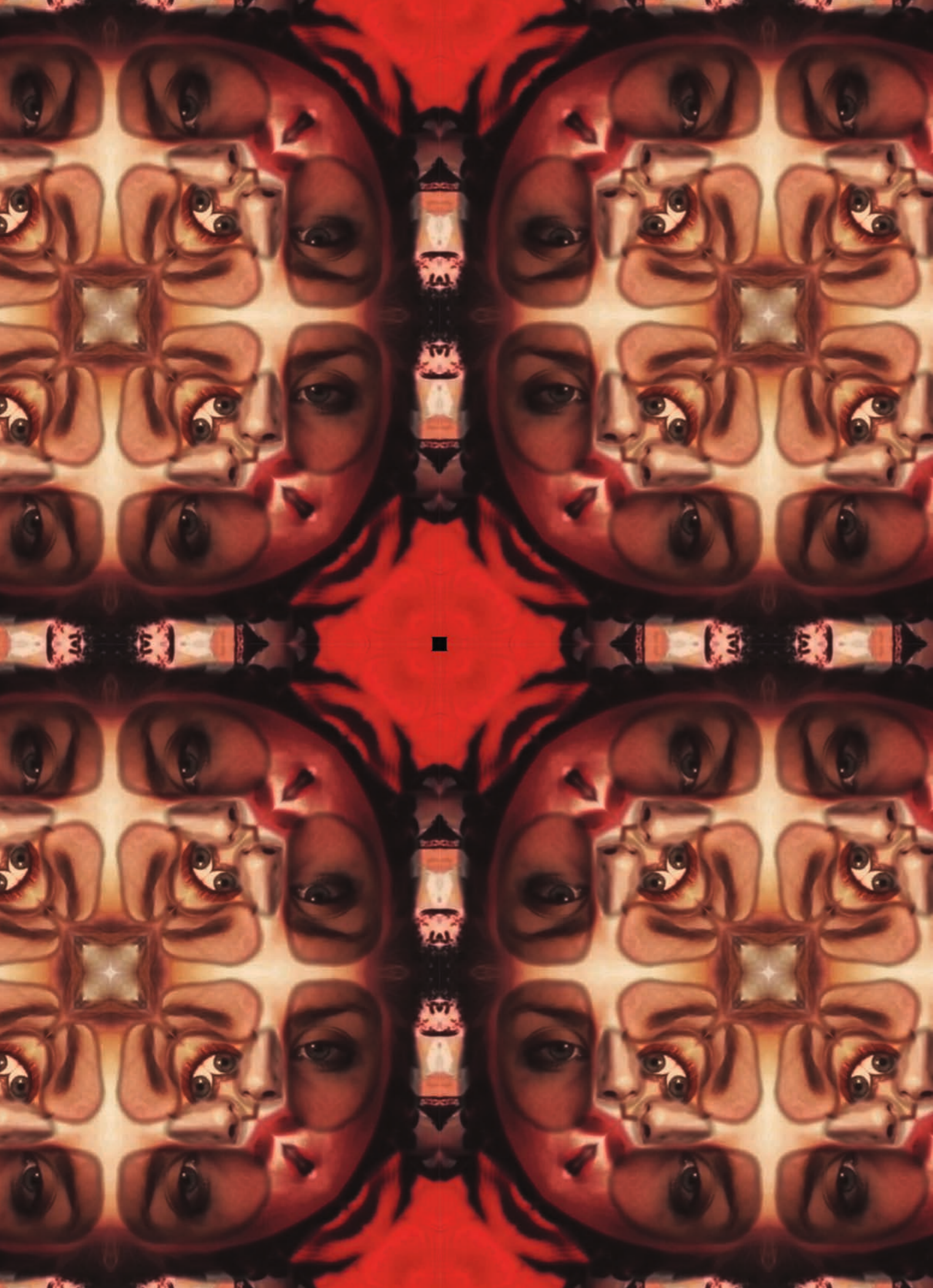
B

C



B, C Digital Annihilation, 2017, C-Print/ Video Still, 70x125cm



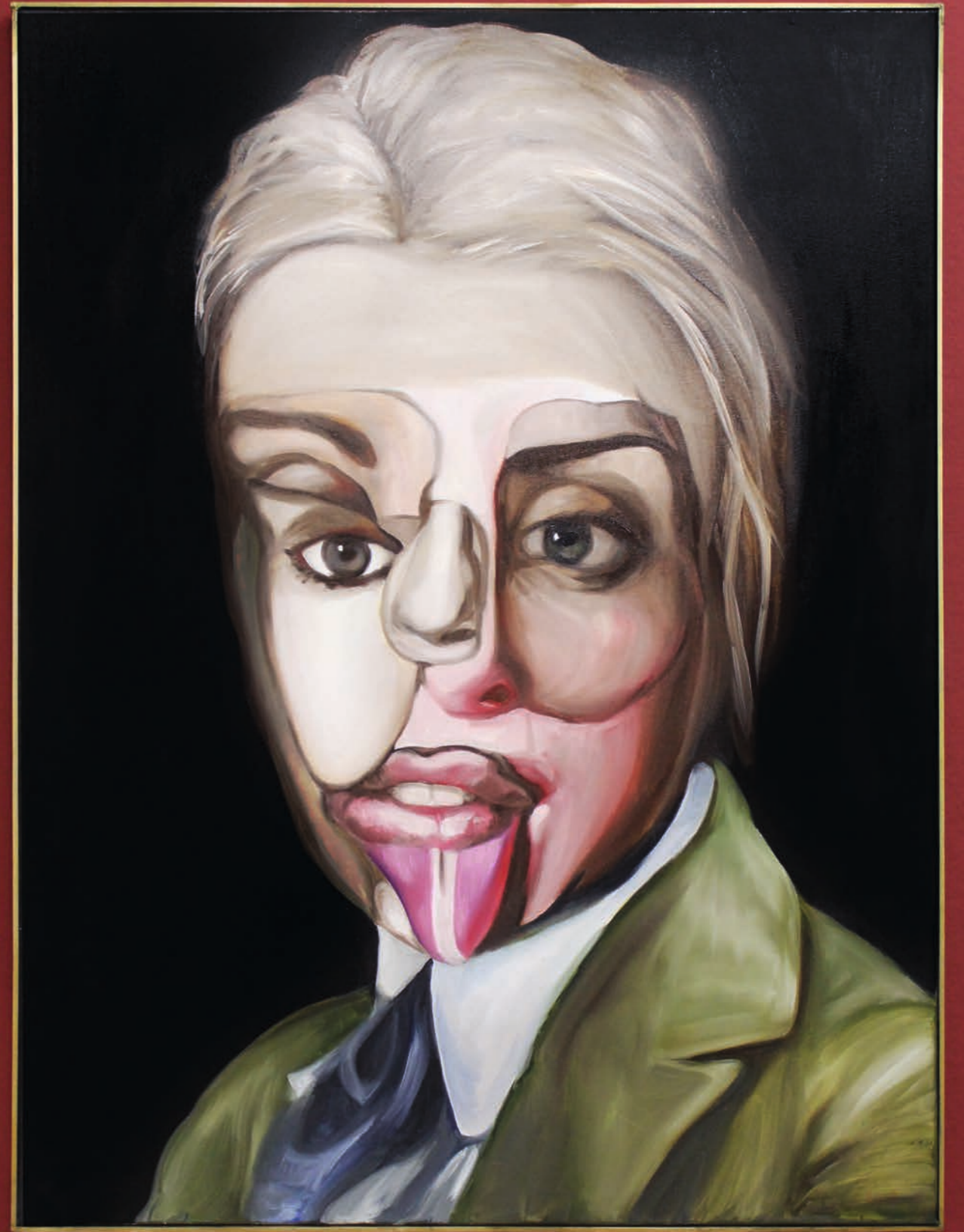


E, F



D Ausstellungsansicht in der Villa Merkel, Esslingen,
v.l.n.r.: *Portrait (With Tongue For An Ear)*, *Portrait (In Profile)*,
Portrait (With One Eye), 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, jeweils 90×120cm

E *Study For A Museum Display*, 2017, Fototapete
F Ausstellungsansicht *Portrait (With Green Tweed Suit and Tie)*,
2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 90×120cm





g Ausstellungsansicht *Portrait (With Very Light Skin)*, 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, ø50cm

h Ausstellungsansicht *Portrait (With Green Tweed Suit and Tie)*, 2016, Öl auf Leinwand, 90×120cm

i Ausstellungsansicht *Portrait (With Faun Ears and Purple Haze)*, 2016, Öl auf Leinwand, 210×400cm





J Portrait (With Three Faces and Proust's ear), 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 120×160cm und Portrait (With Picasso's Ear), 2017, 120×160cm

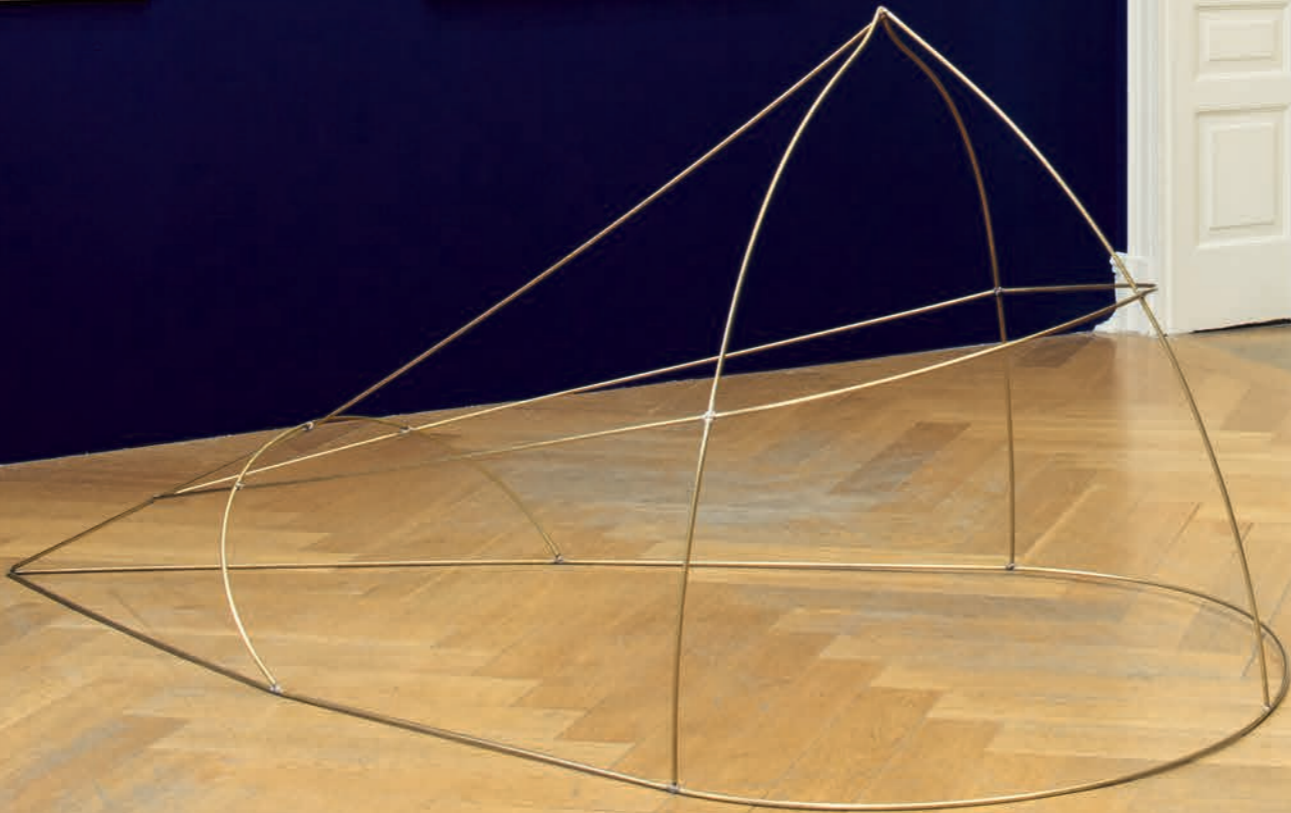
K

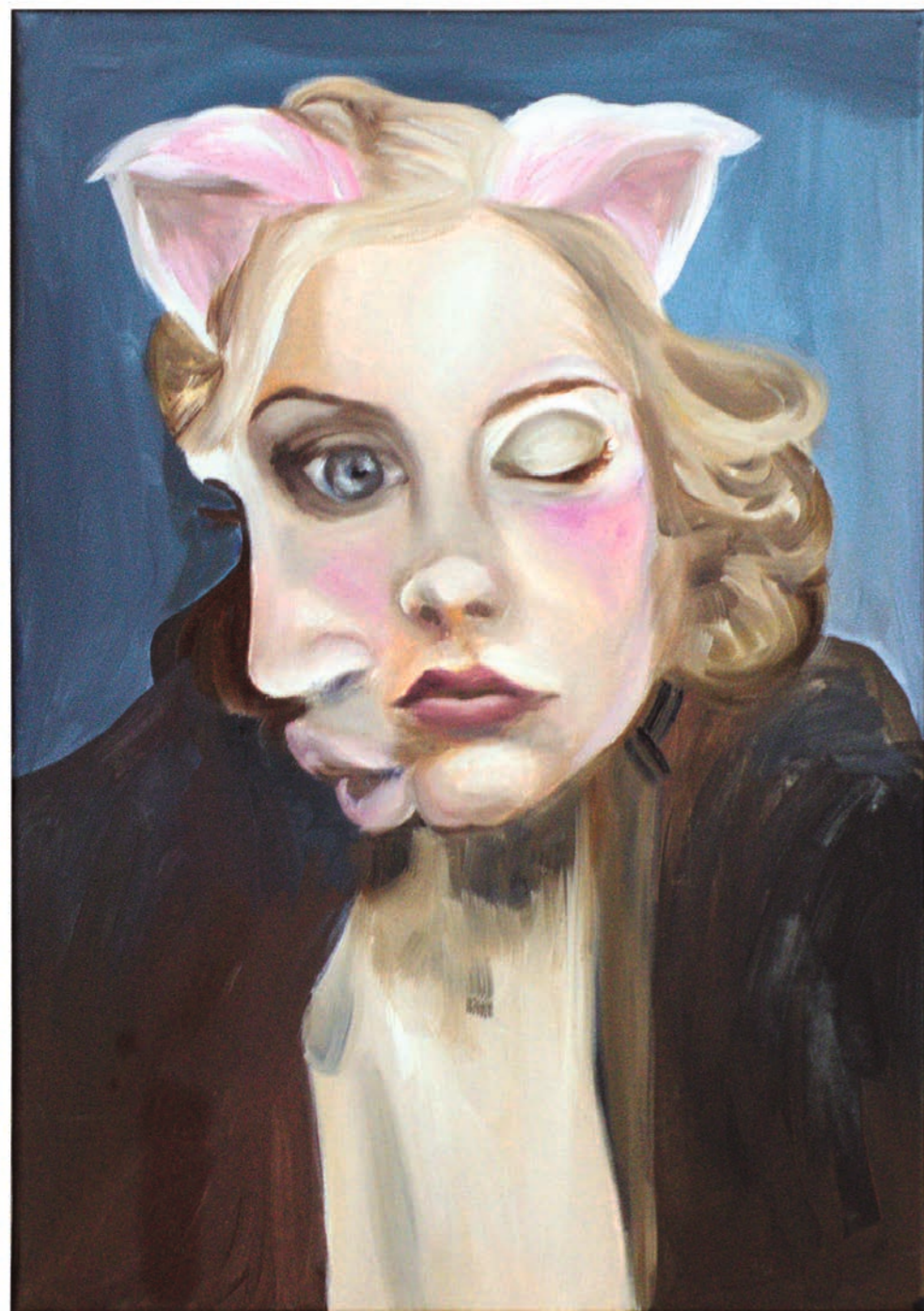
L



K Portrait (With Many Eyes), 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 90×120cm

L Portrait (With Spanish Mask), 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 90×120cm





n o



m *Portrait (With Animal Masks)*, 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 90x120cm; *Portrait (With Red Bra Strap)*, 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 90x120cm;
Portrait (With Many Eyes), 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 90x120cm; *Portrait (With Spanish Mask)*, 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 90x120cm

n *Portrait (With Pink Ears)*, 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 60x40cm o *Portrait (With Three Eyes and Three Mouths)*,
 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 60x40cm





r *Ausstellungsansicht Zeichnungen, 2017.*
Aquarellstifte auf Papier, verschiedene Formate

q

r



q *Open Torso, 2017.*
Aquarellstifte auf Papier, 42×35cm

r *Judith Holofernes, 2017.*
Aquarellstifte auf Papier, 45×34 cm



S, T



s *Ausstellungsansicht Portrait (In Bed), 2017, Öl auf Leinwand, 60×40cm, Sculpture (Trap), 2017, Messing, 130×200cm*

t *Sculpture (Trap), Detail, 2017, Messing, 130×200cm*

CHARLIE STEIN:
SELF PORTRAITURE AS INFORMATION-BASED
CULTURAL CRITIQUE
Selena Parnon

Since the turn of the millennium, developed countries have seen the proliferation of Facebook (2005), Instagram (2010), and Snapchat (2011), along with a parallel mass accumulation of wealth at the upper strata of society – and a subsequent sociological fallout deeply rooted in our access to such invasive, addictive, and borderline narcissistic networking technologies. Today we can state without doubt that the ability for individuals to circulate content globally has forever altered international trade, politics, and even law. At its root, that ability has also drastically affected visual culture.

In the same way that photocopying marked a departure from print media in the 1970s – photocopiers democratized and made approachable an otherwise oft-overlooked creative and/or documentary method—smartphones and their front-facing-camera brethren have revolutionized the art of viewing and depicting the self and world.⁽¹⁾ As such, our most effective bellwether for cultural shifts and changes in photography today may be Instagram: the office bulletin board equivalent of the 21st century. On Instagram, angles, filters, and tags compose curated posts and profiles that define not just certain users, but a generation of ad infinitum networking. Corresponding *comments* drift in a sea of *friends* (and strangers alike), and hashtags allow content to resurface long after sinking to the bottom of a feed. All this detritus tells the observant web surfer where tastes are changing and defines distinct eras. Whereas photographs of the 1980s can be characterized by pastel palettes, rounded edges, and fades, in the 21st century style changes don't happen every decade—they happen every few months.⁽²⁾

Simply scroll through an Instagram profile to encounter 2014 photos edited with vignettes, 2015 ones with Valencia filters, and most recently, hyper-saturated and high definition landscape and panoramic shots.⁽³⁾ Indeed, increased access to photography through smartphones has ushered in a new generation of understanding the image, where would-be stylistic tidal waves are normalized within the ocean of culture, and content becomes dated before it's released. Surprisingly, seismic shifts in visual culture like the ones we've witnessed since the dawn of the internet are as of yet largely absent content within contemporary art.

Enter: Charlie Stein. This artist, born into pre-fall of the Wall Germany and raised during the German Reunion, studied visual art theory and practice at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Stuttgart and Munich under professors Christian Jankowski, Rainer Ganahl, and Gerhard Merz. Stein's formal education in critical thinking opened the doors to her multimedia practice today. Whether a painting, comic strip, or paper cup, Stein's work complicates fundamental artistic media with oxymoronic subject matter. This manifests most recently in her series of self portraits entitled *Digitale Entwertung* (Digital Annihilation). Few art historical concepts are more impersonal than the figurative self portrait. To see what an artist sees through the depiction of her landscape or as seen in historical paintings is to step inside a perspective—but to decode how an artist portrays herself is another pursuit entirely. Even widely acclaimed self portraitists (Van Gogh and Munch come to mind) betray at best an artist's isolation-induced self-reproach.

(1) For an analysis on the photocopier's societal impact see Thompson, Clive. "How the Photocopier Changed the Way We Worked—And Played." *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2015.

(2) See William Eggleston's photographs—heralded as pioneers for the recognition of color photography as fine art, these works paved the way for twenty years of similar aesthetics in color photography. Today many works can be dated by sight because of how closely they adhere to Eggleston's aesthetics.

(3) As of writing in 2017 (subject to change—and quickly!)

After all, it is a universal human experience to never see one's own figure head on. Thus figurative self portraiture is most related to, at its most fundamental level, the perceptions of others.

The inception of front-facing cameras fundamentally altered the trajectory of self portraiture in everyday life. Today, the majority of the first world owns a smartphone—and with it, a camera. Smartphones catalyzed the boom of social networks more so than any other technological device—Instagram alone grew from 100 to 700 million users over the last four years.⁽⁴⁾ Impulses to snap selfies while on exotic trips, post about travel plans, and *like* advertisements from one's favorite celebrities have proven to be not just inescapable, but noxious – especially for children. Today, the female body's vulnerability in the wake of social media is rapidly becoming a very real societal concern.⁽⁵⁾ Stein uses these social and art historical conditions as a point of departure in her self portraiture, taking advantage of new technologies for self portrayal while referencing both their far-reaching impacts on culture and roots in art history.

Stein's portraits-cum-cultural critique are difficult to unpack in one sitting, and – I've found – are most rewarding when two vantage points are explored: content and medium. Stein's paintings begin on her phone, on which she takes a photo of her face using either Snapchat or Instagram. From there, Stein filters, cuts, and collages her face onto itself, often mixing and layering her anatomy. It is not unusual for Stein's compositions to include six eyes, five ears, or a set of double noses, in a clear nod to both Francis Bacon and Pablo Picasso. Stein's work at this stage sometimes involves a moving-image component, vibrating with off-kilter blinks, nostril flares, and tongue wiggles. Stein's aesthetics present her features from various angles as a reference to portraiture across genre—from police mug shots, where right profile,

full-face, and three-quarter view are all taken for a full understanding of the person at hand, to mythology, in which Janus, Roman god of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, duality, doorways, passages, and endings, is depicted as having two faces, referencing sight into both the future and to the past.

Once her composition is complete, Stein compresses her video into a single iconic image which is ultimately transcribed with paint on canvas. Stein paints loosely when rendering her final image, accentuating characteristics specific to the medium of paint while paying homage to portraits past—or, let's clarify—male portraits by male artists past.⁽⁶⁾ Here her work takes a political turn. "I noticed that men too often mistook the softness in my paintings as some sort of invitation to critique my ability", Stein says about her work. "I realized the importance of continuing that style to break down hundreds of years of cultural barriers and value judgments made by men for men. Just because it's always been a certain way doesn't mean that's the right way." And indeed, while the stylistic choice to forego photorealism in her paintings is easy to brush off on first glance as a lack of skill, it's a marked departure from the European norm of artist as connoisseur or artisan, and a pointed rejection of the [male] canon as the standard for painters to strive towards. Stein paints in the here and now, reminding viewers that she exists as an artist not to make up for lost time or compete with male portraiture of the last three thousand years, but to paint alongside the greats of today.

Upon first look, *Digitale Entwertung* works are not entirely self evident. Interest in how Stein comes about these compositions, or why, is a secondary reaction to the works, after a guttural feeling of distaste towards a subject who simultaneously disrupts and situates herself within the history of female portraiture, and who presents as a grotesque *other* rather than an extension of viewer desire.

Stein purposely appropriates first and foremost the social networking filters most often used for beautification—these filters reduce blemishes, enlarge eyes, and add artificial makeup to idealize the female form. When collaged onto themselves, however, the effect is not, in this case, a dream woman—rather it's a refraction of those ideals into a new non-traditionally-beautiful form. In this way, Stein innovates by invoking abhorrence with filters engineered to depict desire. Stein's deviation is especially pertinent because beautification filters are increasingly accepted on social networks as reality. As of this writing, female body image and weight-related mental illnesses are on the rise and increasingly linked to access to social media, as teen girls look in the mirror and see pimpled, mis-proportioned human beings rather than photoshopped and filtered Instagram-ready stock models.⁽⁷⁾ Just think—Stein's surreal self portrayal, otherworldly and demented, hinges on a tool that has worked its way under the radar into Western cultural norms. Why is it that such filters are taken for reality when they make others look beautiful, and pushed aside as surreal when they make others look ugly? Indeed, Stein's work ruminates on the surreal in everyday life, and our instinctive optimization of culture at large—i.e. 'the grass is always greener' mentality. That is to say, a belief in social media as an accurate representational reality is linked to toxic advertising schemes and fake news reports, with a large majority of these practices stemming from well-circulated altered or non-representational figurative photography.⁽⁸⁾

That photography does not have a 1:1 relationship with reality is a concept as old as the medium itself, explored by pioneering artists from László Moholy-Nagy to Gordon Matta Clark. Yet this fact is also irreconcilable in the human brain: it goes against our understanding of the world to take a photograph as false documentation.⁽⁹⁾

Those who understand this fundamental human flaw in perception wield a very real power over society. In fact, one cannot ignore—given Stein's German heritage—that the most egregious abuse of this mental loophole to date was by Adolf Hitler, who not only encouraged but invested in the spread of the hand-held camera in Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany in order to pull off a massive propaganda campaign.⁽¹⁰⁾ Hitler understood that once every citizen could photograph, photos would be viewed as largely credible—allowing state-altered photography to circulate unquestioned.⁽¹¹⁾ Stein, a German born and raised, addresses this cognitive dissonance by transposing her photos through paint, allowing viewers to work backwards from their facticity to their photography-based origins, rather than forwards in a trajectory that often ends before its climax. Which is to say that viewers rarely realize the extent to which photographic documents are altered. Simply by reducing the realism of her product, Stein exposes the mechanism of filtering on Instagram as one equally as nonrepresentational as painting—after all, didn't Baroque court painters famously thin and perfect their subjects?⁽¹²⁾ Stein takes the toxic portraiture culture that we perceive as our reality today, and exposes it for what it is: surrealism.

Perpendicular to Stein's study of photographic media runs her exploration of the contemporary male gaze and the history of female portraiture. Thus if we can understand her work's manifestation in paint as exposing the history of photography-as-propaganda, we can understand its content as self portraiture through a discussion on the viewer's relationship to the work. Stein's portraits are cropped at the bust or higher, largely desexualizing her as a female subject. The fantastical compositions of her facial features, moreover, render her as alien rather than human within her work. As if this weren't enough, Stein exhibits paintings in installation-like groups,

(4) For a description of "the twin rise of the smartphone and social media" see Twenge, Jean M. "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *The Atlantic*, September 2017. Online. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198>, accessed Feb 17 2018.

(5) See Vitelli, Romeo. "Media Exposure and the 'Perfect Body.'" *Psychology Today*, November 2015. Online. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/media-spotlight/201511/media-exposure-and-the-perfect-body>, accessed Feb 17 2018.

(6) Here with "characteristics specific to the medium of paint" I refer to limitations to and strengths of paint as a means of representation—when compared to photography, for example, which is clearly more capable of documenting a likeness to reality. For an brief introduction to this realm of art theory, see Janis, Carroll. "IS IT, OR ISN'T IT?" *Notes in the History of Art*, Vol. 24 No. 2, Winter 2005. Online. <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/sou.24.2.23208117>, accessed Feb 17 2018 and Plagens, Peter. "Some Problems in Recent Painting." *Art Journal*, Vol. 30 No. 2, Winter 1970-1971. Online. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/775430>, accessed Feb 17 2018.

(7) See de Vries, Dian A. "Adolescents' Social Network Site Use, Peer Appearance-Related Feedback, and Body Dissatisfaction: Testing a Mediation Model." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 45 No. 1, January 2016. Online. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4698286/>, accessed Feb 17 2018.

(8) See Eveleth, Rose. "How fake images change our memory and behavior." *BBC Future*, December 13, 2012. Online. <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20121213-fake-pictures-make-real-memories>, accessed Feb 17 2018.

(9) This is a complex psychological issue that has been exploited for hundreds of years to control the behavior of consumers. See Harper, Bernard and Latto, Richard. "The Non-Realistic Nature of Photography: Further Reasons Why Turner Was Wrong." *Leonardo*, Vol. 40 No. 3, 2007. p 245–247, Gu, Yi. "What's in a Name? Photography and the Reinvention of Visual Truth in China, 1840–1911." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 95 No. 1, March 2015. p 120-138, and Guerin, Frances. *Through Amateur Eyes: Film and Photography in Nazi Germany*. "Amateur Film in Nazi Germany." University of Minnesota Press. November 30, 2011. USA. p 29–32. Guerin's study is discussed further in the following sections.

(10) See Guerin.

(11) *Ibid.*

(12) Velasquez also famously did not partake in this practice. See Brown, David Alan. "Leonardo and the Idealized Portrait in Milan." *Arte Lombarda*, No. 67, 1983. p 102–116.

sometimes overwhelming rooms with scores of different contortions of her face upon a single wall.

Anyone who has been to the Louvre knows the feeling of looking up at a 30-foot wall hung salon-style with figurative paintings, and sinking into the floor as a distinct feeling of insignificance takes root. The male gaze in such an environment ceases to exist, as one can only look in so many directions at once. The late bloom of the museum in visual culture was a direct consequence of this phenomenon:⁽¹³⁾ Paris salons of the 19th century—to which the Louvre is immeasurably indebted—presented opportunities to buy individual works, which were placed in private homes. That is to say, museum-style exhibitions did not allow for portrait viewing in the same way that private ownership did, and 19th century female portraiture was born more for the latter purpose.⁽¹⁵⁾ Much like she takes advantage of photography as a non-representational medium, Stein riffs off of the Paris Salon as an exhibition history, and the human nature it revealed: rather than blocking the male gaze with a fully abstracted work as early 20th century female painters attempted to do, Stein throws it back: five hundred deformed blonde faces, all similar yet different, staring back at the viewer as if to say I can see you but you can't see me—and I know it.

Also in the realm of content is everything that Stein's work is not. Stein paints a blonde white woman—a subject in the company of Botticelli's Venus, Manet's bar tender of the Folies-Bergère, and Warhol's Marilyn. Perhaps a more apt relationship to mine as portrayal of the [blonde] self as other exists within the work of Cindy Sherman. But when is a portrait of a blonde girl just a portrait of a blonde girl? In Scandinavia, where blond is a visual norm? Or in cinema in the art historically referencing movie 'The Girl with the Pearl Earring' via the beautiful half Danish, Jewish and Catholic New Yorker, Scarlett Johansson?

Stein's grotesque works reflect on the dirty blonde: poor whites and privilege both come to mind with the term dirty, which doesn't make much sense as does the color strawberry-blonde. But perhaps these terms take a license of their own? In Stein's work, what's represented is neither Cinderella blonde nor the dirty blonde, but platinum blonde, like baby hair. Unlike the aloof humor of the babies, however, Stein depicts herself with a cold dignity. Maybe this is a point of tension, considering her oeuvre which often encourages viewer participation and interview-based research? Maybe it's a reflection of the viewer's mindset upon seeing an unfamiliar human form? Perhaps both, or it is open-ended as such, expanding its capacities for reverberation and relationality.

The so called 'American Beauty' (blonde hair, blue eyes) is another trope one could add, but we can plainly see the clownish exaggeration of features in Stein's work that defies this standard. On top of that, the so-called American Beauty is newly out of style, with respondents to surveys of beauty identifying mixed-race women as the epitome of beauty since 2011.⁽¹⁶⁾ This antiquated beauty ideal reminds us of Stein's debts to forefathers in beauty standard provocation like Koons, Warhol, Lichtenstein, and other contemporary and classical 'pop' artists alike. Clearly Stein draws from her peers as inspiration, and as such is an extension thereof.

As blonde hair becomes more of a trend than a characteristic, reactions to the democratization of physical attributes abound as one might expect. As Black Lives Matter reverberates through the United States, and refugee intake rocks the EU, a defiant pair of ponytails show up in New York and Calabasas.⁽¹⁷⁾ And whether at the Kardashians' house or Villa Merkel, hopefully both spaces remind us that what exists persists unless we confront it, talk about it, process it, re-iconize it and celebrate it—on the streets of Berlin or L.A. as much as in the museum.⁽¹⁸⁾

(13) That is to say, our inability to objectify women when presented with a discordant crowd of them.

(14) See Shelton, Andrew Carrington. "Art, Politics, and the Politics of Art: Ingres's 'Saint Symphorien' at the 1834 Salon." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 83 No. 4, p 711–739.

(15) See Dawson, Alene. "What is beauty and who has it?" CNN, June 29, 2011. Online. <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/LIVING/06/29/global.beauty.culture/index.html>, accessed Feb 17 2018.

Does Stein's work free her of identity politics, as a watershed? Francis Bacon remarked to David Sylvester in 1975, "I loathe my own face. ...I've done a lot of self-portraits, really because people have been dying around me like flies and I've nobody else left to paint but myself."⁽¹⁹⁾ In Bacon's striking triptych, *Three Studies for a Self Portrait*, his head emerges from a deep abyss of black paint, providing no sense of the space inhabited by the sitter. This tightly constricted view allows only for ruminations on the face itself: its ravages, its deep psychological depths, and the sense of turning around it slowly, going from one frame to the next, as if in a languorous panning shot. The same could be said of Stein's work, with the addendum that the female subject and subjectivity involved position these works as uniquely self-conscious.

As visual media and contemporary art proceed into wider electronic forums, art about art becomes an expansive echo. This din of fanfare around 'Art' (or DJing, party photography, or any prior turn of the millennium social trend) proliferates a social appreciation of art as an idea or effort, while drowning out more nuanced voices of critical, current art that push consciousness deeper rather than wider.

The time to review the turn of the millennium swells amidst the breaking waves of an original and global acculturation of the Real. In order for interpretations of human consciousness and feminist ideology to penetrate the sphere of high culture, society as an institution must adapt to information-based modes of creation and consumption without hierarchies of labor and wealth: something Stein aims to catalyze with her self portraiture. Using filters that equalize subjects and objects alike, Stein subverts a medium as of yet absent in contemporary art, asking her viewer to traverse the distance between the selfie-stick and the self, and examine her paintings with the same immediacy as one would an Instagram photo.

(16) Ibid.

(17) For the details of this reference, which alludes to Kim Kardashian—a public figure and fashion icon known for her physique, business acumen, and slick dark hair—dying her hair blonde see Lin, Summer. "Kim Kardashian Just Dyed Her Hair Platinum Blonde Again." *Elle*, September 6, 2017. Online. <http://www.elle.com/beauty/a12185549/kim-kardashian-platinum-blonde-again/>, accessed Feb 17 2018.

(18) This discussion on Stein as a blonde subject was borne from a conversation with Patrick Meagher, one of Stein's colleagues.

(19) See The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Francis Bacon: *Three Studies for a Self Portrait*." Online. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/489966>, accessed Feb 17 2018.

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AUSBILDUNG

- 2016 - 17 Meisterschüler im Weißenhof-Programm der Staatlichen Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart (GUTACHTER: PROF. CHRISTIAN JANKOWSKI, DR. THOMAS GIRST)
- 2008 - 15 Studium der Bildenden Kunst an der ABK Stuttgart bei Prof. Christian Jankowski und Rainer Ganahl
- 2013 Studium an der Tongji University in Shanghai (CHN)
- 2007 - 08 Studium der freien Malerei & Grafik an der Staatlichen Akademie der Bildenden Künste in München, Klasse Gerhard Merz

EINZEL- AUSSTELLUNGEN (AUSWAHL)

- 2017 *One Show Closer To The End*, Herrenhaus Edenkoben; *The Dual Nature of Be, Do and Have*, 155 Rivington, New York City (USA)
- 2015 *Eye To Eye*, Salon Neucologne e.V. Berlin
- 2010 *Schlüsselangst*, Bund Bildender Künstlerinnen Württemberg e.V., Stuttgart

GRUPPEN- AUSSTELLUNGEN (AUSWAHL)

- 2017 *GröKaZs*, Villa Merkel, Esslingen; *001530*, Kunstverein Schorndorf; *Querschnitt*, BBK Stuttgart; *Helle Kindheit, Dunkle Kindheit*, Museum Villa Rot, Rot; *Horst&Maria: Die perfekten Bewohner, The Curated Day*, 15. IKSIV Istanbul Biennale, House of Wisdom, Istanbul; *Sinopale 6, Sinop*, (TR); *Imaginary Soundcloud*, Regierungspräsidium Kassel; *POSTER*, Blackball Projects, Williamsburg, NYC (USA); *Mermaids and Unicorns* (KURATIERT VON TINA SAUERLÄNDER), Online. *Ichduersiees*, Kunstverein Ludwigsburg
- 2016 *Bum.*, Kunstverein Schorndorf; *Sound and Space*, BBK BW, Stuttgart; *Manifestina goes Palermo*, Palermo Galerie, Stuttgart; *NICHTS* (MIT ROCKO SCHAMONI); *Manifesta11 (Cabaret Voltaire)* Zurich (CH); *Death can dance - Nature morte*. (KURATIERT VON LORI HERSBERGER), Berlin; *Manifestina* (INITIERT VON MAURIZIO CATTELAN); *La rue des Arts - Tulle*, France. *Car Park*, Das Arty, Berlin; *Public Privacy*, (KURATIERT VON ALICE PEDROLETTI), Shanghai (CH); *Belrose Highlights*, Sea Foundation of the Arts, Tilburg (NL); *Different Ways*, Kunstzentrum Karlskaserne, Ludwigsburg

- 2015 *Paradise*, ACAF Australia China Art Foundation, Shanghai (CHN); *Parade*, Contemporary Istanbul; *Besetzt. / Occupied.*, Kunstverein Schorndorf; *LOVE*, Galerie Utopia, Athina Art Fair, Athen (GR); *Call of the Wild*, Galleria Fuori Orbita, Locarno (CH); *90min Shows*, (KURATIERT VON MARCUS GRAF), CI Contemporary Istanbul (TR); *Filmz - Festival des deutschen Kinos*, Gutenberg Museum Mainz; *Continental Drift*, Songjiang Art Museum, Shanghai (CHN); *Urban Shades* (PROJECT OF HADAS ZUCKER) Design Museum Holon, Holon (ISR); *Tansmembran: Social Bodies And Their Framing*, Kunstverein Feuerbach; *Endlosschleife 2014/2041*, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart; *UCLA: Untitled Art Cafe*, UCLA Broad Arts Center, Los Angeles (USA); *Im Glashaus* (KURATOR), Jenseits Von Jedem, Stuttgart; *No Place To Hide* (KURATIERT VON FELIX ENSSLIN), AfA Stuttgart
- 2013 *Clair Obscur Filmfestival*, Basel (CH); *Show Me Yours, I'll Show You Mine*, Wilhelmshaus Stuttgart
- 2010 *Until you don't like it anymore*, Forgotten Bar - Galerie im Regierungsviertel, Berlin;
- 2008 *Multi Level Analysis*, Internationalgalerie, Stuttgart
- Mythos 68*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Warschau (PL)

FÖRDERUNGEN / STIPENDIEN

- 2017 Atelierstipendium Herrenhaus Edenkoben, Rheinland-Pfalz
- 2017 Aufenthalt in der Kulturakademie Tarabya, Istanbul (TR)
- 2015 Atelierstipendium der ACAF - Australia China Art Foundation, für Shanghai (CHN)
- 2015 Atelierstipendium Trélex Residency, Trélex (CH)
- 2013 Stipendium des Landes Baden-Württemberg in Shanghai (CHN)
- 2010 DAAD Stipendium, Beijing (CHN)

PREISE / AUSZEICHNUNGEN

- 2016 Nominierung für das Karl-Schmidt-Rottluff Stipendium
- 2010 Auszeichnung der Klett-Passage
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