PRESS RELEASE

Berlin, Aug 16, 2022

QUEERNESS IN PHOTOGRAPHY
Under Cover . A Secret History of Cross-Dressers . Sébastien Lifshitz Collection
Casa Susanna . Cindy Sherman Collection
Orlando . Curated by Tilda Swinton

C/O Berlin presents the exhibition Queerness in Photography from Sep 17, 2022 to Jan 18, 2023. The opening will be held on Friday, Sep 16, 2022, at 20:00, at C/O Berlin in the Amerika Haus at Hardenbergstraße 22–24, 10623 Berlin.

A young man looks gracefully at the camera, his head slightly turned, delicate rouge shimmering on his high cheekbones, lips painted a seductive red, and light blue eye shadow glistening on his eyelids. In this half-portrait, his pink-lacquered fingers touch his right cheek, and a ring features prominently on his pinkie. Is this actually the likeness of a woman? Are we able to determine a person’s identity simply by reading gender-specific visual codes?

C/O Berlin examines the representation of identity, gender, and sexuality in photography in three complementary exhibitions entitled Queerness in Photography, ranging from historical image material that shows the act of photographing as a way to find one’s identity, a documentation of a safe space that is unique in the history of photography, to contemporary forms of expressing gender fluidity, all of which bring up the question of whether socially constructed genders are even topical today.

Since the invention of the medium in 1839, photography has not only depicted people; it has also significantly influenced their position in society and politics due to the way that photography visually categorizes people based on their physical characteristics, behavior, and clothing. By marking constructed gender roles, they also became a medium of stigmatization and discrimination. Just as the current discourse on the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community is continually developing all over the world, terms and topics are constantly being renegotiated, and the photographic vocabulary for the visual depiction of queerness has also multiplied. The three exhibitions on Queerness in Photography reveal a complex panorama and show that photography can also be an act of liberation and self-empowerment. By visualizing one’s own identity or documenting the common solidarity in the queer community, new forms of artistic representation are created.

In the exhibition Under Cover . A Secret History of Cross-Dressers, C/O Berlin presents the collection of amateur photographs that French director and filmmaker Sébastien Lifshitz has amassed over several decades. Since the 1860s people used the medium of photography to question and challenge their assigned gender identity based on clothing or physical traits. Without knowledge of the particular genesis or personal motivation of the individual photographs, these depictions clearly express the wish of the people portrayed to explore themselves before the camera: in addition to the rebellion against imposed social expectations and political regulations they become aware of their own identity in the photographic self-portraits.
Divided into various sections, the Lifshitz Collection spans 120 years of queer forms of representation and culturally localizes global phenomena such as cross-dressing in the visual arts such as the theater or cabaret. In addition to androgynous persons in suits, the early forerunners of RuPaul’s extravagant drag queens, and women who marry other women in mock weddings, there are many forms of visual representation for feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, trans people and the liberalization of sexuality in *Under Cover: A Secret History Cross-Dressers*. Sébastien Lifshitz Collection. Social progress is visually anticipated in the historical image material, which was only achieved because people behaved in a nonconformist matter or defied the binary attributions of gender conventions. The visual documents of the Lifshitz Collection are among the more significant discoveries of the recent history of photography, which also fill a blank in cultural memory. Exhibition produced by Les Rencontres d’Arles.

*Casa Susanna* . *Cindy Sherman Collection* presents original photographs of Casa Susanna from the collection of the photographer who is probably the world’s most famous artist of disguise. “I found the Casa Susanna photos in an actual scrap book that was for sale at an antiques flea market in New York City about 17 years ago. The scrap book itself wasn’t worth saving but the photos blew my mind,” explains Sherman about her historical discovery. Casa Susanna was a safe space for cross-dressers and trans women in Hunter, New York, in the 1950s and 1960s. Within this small community, members could together explore their identities—at a time when lifestyles, sexuality, and gender deviating from heteronormative expectations and conventions were stigmatized and even prosecuted.

The act of photographing within this community was socially volatile, since the members were documenting something that was not allowed at the time: a life outside of socially constructed gender roles as well as personal growth that was based on an individual’s own needs.

The visual world of Casa Susanna reveals the solidarity within this community as well as the light-heartedness and joy of people who are allowed to be themselves. Simultaneously, due to the fact that issues such as transidentity, sexuality, and cross-dressing had been taboo in society for decades, the visual testimony from Casa Susanna continues to have a mysterious character, since the protagonists and photographers can no longer explain their intentions. These pictures confront us today with questions about sexuality and identity: are men who wear women’s clothes necessarily gay? What makes a woman in a photograph into a woman? Who establishes the criteria? Is it the viewer? The works from Sherman’s collection, together with the Lifshitz Collection, create a unique and empowering queer image archive at C/O Berlin—one that must be preserved and appreciated by future generations.

In 1992 Tilda Swinton played the gender-nonconforming lead role in Sally Potter’s award-winning film *Orlando*, which was based on the eponymous novel written by Virginia Woolf in 1928. Woolf’s novel tells the story of a young aristocrat who lives for centuries. Without aging, the character in the novel is also able to mysteriously change his gender.
“I see Orlando as a story about the life of a person who is striving to completely free himself from the constructs of gender and social norms,” is how Swinton describes the subject. Her androgyny in the film contributed to her image as one of the most versatile actors of her generation and ultimately established her as an icon in the LGBTQIA+ community. Against the backdrop of the book and the film, Swinton was commissioned by the magazine Aperture to curate the exhibition Orlando for C/O Berlin. Gender fluidity and the idea of a limitless awareness are interwoven in a totally new way within the exhibition.

The works in Orlando . Curated by Tilda Swinton, some of which were created especially for the show, present various perspectives on questions of identity, gender, origin, and sexuality. Through the diversity of artistic approaches and perspectives, common concepts, forms of representation, and power relations are broken. Through the choice of the artists, their artistic new interpretation of the topics, and the identity-bestowing construction of new narratives, generally marginalized or underrepresented views are given a stage. The visual reflection of human existence in its diversity is at the same time an inspiring call for impartiality, empathy, and tolerance in contemporary art photography.

The exhibition presents works by the artists Zackary Drucker, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Jamal Nxedlana, Elle Pérez, Walter Pfeiffer, Sally Potter, Viviane Sassen, Collier Schorr, Mickalene Thomas, and Carmen Winant. Exhibition organized by Aperture, New York.
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Exhibition Sep 17, 2022 – Jan 18, 2023
Press Tour Sep 16, 2022 . 11:00
Opening Sep 16, 2022 . 20:00

Opening Hours Daily . 11:00–20:00
Admission 10 euro . reduced 6 euro
Organizer C/O Berlin Foundation
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#cindysherman
#orlandoexhibition

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In cooperation with Aperture
Les Rencontres d’Arles

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