

Manon

She Was Once “La dame au crâne rasé”

19/02–29/05/2022

As a dazzling phenomenon, Manon was already stirring up the Zurich scene in the 1970s. She provoked and shocked with her installations and performances, and soon attracted international attention. Today, Manon is seen as one of the pioneers of very personal, yet simultaneously political, feminist art.

Photography initially served Manon as a means of lending permanence to her performances in on-set and ‘making of’ shots. But by using the camera as a tool, the artist soon found her way to a different kind of performance: Photographic mise en scène enabled her to precisely plan and implement in a protected intimate setting, thus satisfying her appetite for exhibitionism, despite her rather shy nature. Manon shares her desires and fears with the audience, bares her body and yet does not show any self-portraits per se. Fascinated by the “interaction between biography and self-presentation” (Manon), she slips into disguises. She makes herself the shaping element of her compositions, aware that we are all part of a complex web of relationships and play various roles: those that are imposed on us and those that we choose for ourselves. Contemplation of the social conditioning of identity, and of gender roles in a patriarchal society in particular, is fundamental to Manon’s work.

Early career

Manon was born in 1940 as Rosmarie Küng in Bern. Her childhood memories are unpleasant. As a child, she was shown more rejection than appreciation by her parents: an economics professor and a former model. At the age of 15, she moved into a hotel room in St Gallen to attend the local school of applied arts. When she had not yet turned 18, she spent several months in a psychiatric clinic, where she met artist Sonja Sekula, who then took her to Zurich. There, she attended a drama academy and gave herself the name ‘Manon’, which she says was inspired by a photograph of actress Cécile Aubry as Manon Lescaut in Henri-Georges Clouzot’s film version of the 1731 novel by Abbé Prévost.

In the subsequent years, she worked as a model (including an annual contract for the brand Playtex). Balthasar Burkhard photographed her in a campaign for the cosmetics line Helena Rubinstein. Manon was also active as a stylist, graphic designer, window dresser and fashion illustrator. In the early 1970s, she married artist Urs Lüthi. The pair reinforced each other’s passion for self-presentation and she started to produce her first photographic works, such as *Polaroids* (1973/74) and *Fetischbilder* (Fetish Pictures, 1974).

In 1972, Manon opened her own boutique in Zurich’s Niederdorf district: ‘The shop for tightrope walkers, go-go girls, pop singers and tamers of predatory animals. For sadomasochists, trapeze artists, fetishists and ballet dancers’. She appeared on the scene in eccentric outfits and frequented Club *Platte 27*, the *Odéon*, *Café Select* and the bar *Kon-Tiki*, attracting the attention of the press. In 1974, after her separation from Urs Lüthi, Manon made a name for herself as an artist by exhibiting her bedroom at the Li Tobler Gallery: *Das lachsfarbene Boudoir* (The Salmon-Coloured Boudoir), a temple of femininity overflowing with lascivious décor, celebrated the interweaving of art and life, which would remain a characteristic of Manon’s oeuvre.

**Zeitansage in Rot (Speaking Clock in Red), 2014 from the series
Die gesammelten Ängste (The Collected Fears), 2015**

This wall-mounted telephone, which announces the current time every few seconds via a microphone, was conceived for the Christian Roellin Gallery in St Gallen and later exhibited at *Station*, a micro-gallery in the centre of the village Appenzell. It is a nostalgic reanimation of a service that is still offered by telecommunication companies, but hardly ever used today. For the duration of the telephone call, a usually female voice announces the hours, minutes and seconds. The passing of time would gradually become the all-dominant theme in the work of Manon, who, on reaching the age of 80, laughingly declared that this age must be a mistake.

Hotel Dolores, 2008–2011 (C-prints on aluminium)

Her disappearance from her images and the incorporation of motifs and props from earlier works characterise Manon's long-term project *Hotel Dolores*. The run-down interiors of Baden's spa hotels *Verenahof*, *Ochsen* and *Bären* inspired the artist to create allusive spatial installations, which she transformed into photographic tableaux. In this exhibition, the *Hotel Dolores* pictures act as parentheses: In one of the first images, a red umbrella marks an empty space; at the end, there is a photograph of a screen, on which no film is seen. In between, the younger Manon appears – as a projection behind a paravent and as a bald pin-up. Manon is still present, sometimes only in the periphery, then suddenly as a passionate accordion player.

La Dame au crâne rasé (The Lady with the Shaved Head), 1977/78/2011

(Vintage silver gelatin prints and later prints on aluminium)

Even before Manon moved to Paris in 1977 to escape the growing public attention in the anonymity of the big city, she shaved her head. A symbolic act: On one hand, it could be read as a rebellion against the prevailing image of women, but on the other hand, it was also a reference to the historical practice of forced shaving as a way of humiliating women and exposing them to ridicule – which was applied, for example, to 'witches' in the Middle Ages or to French women who had entered into relationships with German soldiers during the Nazi occupation of France. Her bald head, bringing to mind the nakedness of the newborn or the skull and crossbones, had a sculptural, androgynous, even surreal doll-like appearance. With this radical gesture, Manon created a mysterious character who was untouchably cool, yet vulnerable at the same time. She set this 158-shot series in, among other places, a room in a dingy Parisian hotel (with one hip bath for the whole building) and a flat occupied by the notorious Susi Wyss, who was away on holiday. The camera was operated by Manon's boyfriend, young architecture student Thierry Wurth, according to her instructions. Her unmistakable shaved head connects the scenes to produce an enigmatic narrative.

Das Doppelzimmer (The Double Room), 1982/2012 (Silver gelatin print on aluminium)

While the encounter between an undressed woman and a dressed man is a classic topos, Manon makes the balance of power tip in this photograph: Her hands rest on the man's. She seems more confident than he does and she obviously dominates the situation. Manon has great inhibitions about 'using' other people for her *mise en scène*. The fact that she appears together with her third husband, Sikander von Bhicknapahari, in the multi-part series *Das Doppelzimmer* is a sign of mutual trust. However, the artist still associates a sense of unease with this picture – one reason being her nudity. To date, it has only been exhibited once: in New York, far away from Zurich.

Borderline, 2007 (C-prints on aluminium)

In 2007, Manon took a conscious step away from perfectly staged beauty with her series of pictures entitled *Borderline*. Unabashed experimental use of the digital camera, held an arm's length away from her, selfie style, resulted in glaring phantom images. Here, the green-yellow

face with closed eyes and bright red lipstick catapults *La dame au crâne rasé* (The Lady with the Shaved Head) into the 21st century, warping the androgynous beauty into a clownish death mask. Manon was beginning to play with her own photographic disintegration, thematising her fear of death.

Selbstporträt in Gold (Self-Portrait in Gold), 2014 (Sublimation print on fabric in front of LED light box)
By thematising age and death, Manon rejects the conventional representation of femininity that is pleasing to the male gaze. Manon, who admits that she wrangles with her own ephemerality to no small extent, processes her fears in art, finding ways to translate them into something playful. For this piece, she artistically appropriated a therapy chair (in which she had to sit every day after a shoulder operation, obeying mechanically preset sequences of movements) and made it part of a fearsome sculpture, the prosthesis of a cyborg reminiscent of the mechanical people in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927) and subsequent science-fiction adaptations. The full-body protective suit, from which two disconcertingly human eyes stare out, is also reminiscent of sadomasochistic bondage practices. This entity invented by Manon is surrounded by an ambivalent aura between pain, pleasure and artificiality, whereby aestheticisation of the body is taken to extremes, contrasting with the functionality of the PVC flooring, ingrain wallpaper and therapy equipment. With its flawless perfection, the gold-coloured sphere to the side comes across like a rescue buoy. The object placed in the same room, entitled *Die Geschichte von den ungleichen Schwestern* (The Story of the Unequal Sisters, 1990) is Manon's memorial to the female artists, actors, writers, philosophers and other women she admires, who have influenced her thinking and work (Simone de Beauvoir, Sonia Delaunay, Marlene Dietrich, Katherine Mansfield, Jeanne Moreau, Virginia Woolf and many more).

Elektrokardiogramm 303/304 (Electrocardiogram 303/304), 1979/2011

(Silver gelatin prints on aluminium)

Manon moved out of her Paris hotel room and into a small two-room flat in a building due for demolition on Rue du Liban in Belleville. Here, she developed her concept for the series *Elektrokardiogramm 303/304*, which saw another design motif find its way into her repertoire: black-and-white geometric patterns, symbolising the dichotomy of life and death via the encounter between total darkness and very harsh light. The chessboard, on the other hand, adds the aspect of play, representing a strategic way of countering so-called strokes of fate. Manon painted a background in the style of a trompe-l'œil, suggesting a constricting spatial situation. She posed for the photographs as if she were caught between two walls, sometimes flirting with this frame, sometimes fighting against it. She is absorbed by the setting as black dots spread across her body, and tries to break out of it by angrily peeling herself out of a cardboard tube. Here, the influence of surrealist photography, such as that of Man Ray or Claude Cahun, is mixed with a punky new-wave aesthetic. The vintage prints from 1979 were implemented in a new large format in 2011, which is further intensified in this installation via the floor and wallpaper: Here, the white cane adds a floating footnote, a link to the immediate present: After two difficult eye operations, the artist now has only limited vision, as if she were standing "in front of a thick black wall" (Manon).

Meines Vaters Bücher (My Father's Books), 2022

Manon kept a single copy of every book published by her father, who was an important political economist in his day. For his part, he perceived her "neither as a person nor as a daughter, let alone as an artist". He never took a look at any of her exhibitions or books, just like her mother. "Nevertheless, I loved him," Manon laconically states, "perforce from a distance. This is my homage to him."

Die graue Wand oder 36 schlaflose Nächte (The Grey Wall or 36 Sleepless Nights), 1979

(Vintage silver gelatin prints)

The series *Die graue Wand oder 36 schlaflose Nächte* comprises a total of 36 photographs and was later described by Manon as a “nightmarish attempt to escape the claustrophobia within oneself, this lifelong solitary confinement in one’s own body”. She sketched possible biographies for a woman of her age and stature, and adopted the characters that emerged from these various life stories: a procedure that she would fall back on in subsequent projects as well. By incorporating (partly stereotypical) notions of femininity, Manon raised questions about identity: Who am I? Who could I be? How might I have turned out? Loosely based on the Arthur Rimbaud quote: “I is another”.

Stilleben (Still Lifes), 2017 (C-prints on aluminium)

The group of pictures entitled *Stilleben* is linked to *Hotel Dolores*. The arrangements are no longer expansive stage sets, but limited to tables and shelves. Although the artist does not appear in person here, she nevertheless remains constantly present, not only as a picture within a picture: The objects also embody her. These still lifes make reference to Manon’s own oeuvre, alongside icons from art history, such as Alexander Rodchenko’s 1924 portrait of *Osip Maksimovich Brik*. Through their abundance of references and their colour coordination, they allude to the ‘nature morte’ in Renaissance painting and its ‘carpe diem’ symbolism.

Künstler Eingang (Artists’ Entrance), 1990 (C-prints on aluminium)

After coming off drugs and taking a 7-year creative hiatus, Manon recommenced her work as an artist in 1990. She continued to serve as her own photo model, but now strove for a more distanced depiction. *Künstler Eingang*, the title of a group of works produced for an exhibition at Kunstmuseum St Gallen, was inspired by Manon’s childhood memory of an auspicious sign on the door to the actors’ dressing room at the municipal theatre. The German title uses only the masculine form of the word ‘artists’, thus referencing and appropriating the male-dominated concept of the artist, and ushering in a new beginning. These large-format triptychs are characterised by centred compositions and symmetrical arrangements. Like images of a futuristic society’s saints, presentations of a superego, these icons seem omniscient. With huge compasses in their hands, the guardians or servants on the sides measure the parameters of human existence (the panels behind them show calculations of ‘lifespan’, ‘errors’, ‘banalities’ and ‘collected absurdities’) while the blindfolded ruler in the middle is unable or unwilling to see. She embodies an oversized clock hand that indicates a time shortly before twelve.

Einst war sie MISS RIMINI (She Was Once MISS RIMINI), 2003 (C-prints on aluminium)

At over 60 years of age, Manon once again devoted herself to an extravagant masquerade, encompassing around 90 images in total. In nightly work sessions with her husband, Sikander von Bhicknapahari, she fine-tuned disguises and poses, savouring the brief breakaway from vanity. This time, she explicitly eschewed beautification and transformed herself into a series of ‘women of a certain age’, who had won a beauty contest on holiday in Rimini when they were young and whose lives had taken very different turns. “None of these women are strangers to me,” says Manon, “I am all of them myself”. Elsewhere, however, she has also stressed that the protagonist Manon does not appear in this series.

Sentimental Journey, 1979/2022

This small cage with no door and two chairs, evoking the situation of a claustrophobically constricting encounter, makes reference to Manon’s *Das Ende der Lola Montez* (The End of Lola Montez, 1975) and *Sentimental Journey* (1979). For both performances, a cage served as the setting. For *Sentimental Journey*, the Amsterdam audience was led one by one through a cordon of 26 female extras, then let into an enclosure by two guards. A pair of ‘lighting girls’

shone lights: one on the bald Manon, who was wearing red satin gloves and seated, and the other on the chair opposite her. The visitors were invited to sit on this chair and engage in a 3-minute confrontation with the silent artist, who either fixed her gaze on her counterpart or looked away – similar to Marina Abramović's performance *The Artist is Present* (2010). By taking a seat in the cage, the observers were forced to identify with the prisoner and to surrender themselves to her gaze.

Lippen (Lips), 2014 (C-prints on aluminium)

With its artificiality and lack of distance, this greatly enlarged close-up of lips painted with bright pink lipstick comes across as more frightening than erotic. The reflection of light and the casting of shadows emphasise the plasticity and sexual connotations of this part of the body, defamiliarised by make-up and photography.

Fetischbilder (Fetish Pictures), 1974/2015 (Later silver gelatin prints)

The *Fetischbilder* were created in collaboration with Balthasar Burkhard in the same year as *Das lachsfarbene Boudoir* (The Salmon-Coloured Boudoir). Objects that seem detached from the spatial installation are perfectly lit and draped on shiny fabrics. The photographic exaggeration caused by cropping reinforces the objects' erotically charged significance: The snake on a horn is both a phallic symbol and a reference to original sin. Manon's foot on a fur becomes a tantalising partial object.

Zwangsjacke (Straightjacket), 2014 (C-prints on aluminium)

In Manon's oeuvre, again and again, this controversial garment, which is rarely used in psychiatric institutions today, represents her claustrophobia and, more broadly, a sense of lacking freedom, of being trapped by desires and expectations. In this 2014 photograph, Manon wears the straitjacket untied. Her hands are concealed, but her arms hang down limply, her gaze lowered as if she is absorbed in internal meditation and humility.

How this exhibition came about

Fotostiftung Schweiz was able to acquire a group of expressive photographs from the series *La dame au crâne rasé* (The Lady with the Shaved Head) back in 1982. Subsequently, two of Manon's more recent works were purchased by the support association "Friends of Fotostiftung Schweiz". In 2020, on the occasion of the artist's 80th birthday and more than 10 years after her retrospective at Helmhaus Zurich, Manon's work was to be celebrated in a joint venture between three exhibition venues, along with a joint publication. The shows at Kunsthaus Zofingen and at Centre culturel suisse, Paris, each revolved around an installation that responded to the respective spatial situation. The exhibition at Fotostiftung Schweiz, which had to be postponed for two years due to the corona pandemic, focuses on Manon's photographic oeuvre, as a significant position in the history of Swiss photography. In order to also do justice to the installational nature of Manon's oeuvre, the presentation of photographic works in this exhibition is complemented by objects and interventions, and embedded in designed spaces. In addition, the SRF documentary *Manon – Glamour und Rebellion* (Manon – Glamour and Rebellion) by Lekha Sarkar is projected in an ancillary room next to the exhibition.

This exhibition was curated by Sacha Nacinovic (assistant to the artist) and Teresa Gruber (Fotostiftung Schweiz) in consultation with Manon.

To accompany the exhibitions at Fotostiftung Schweiz (2022), Kunsthaus Zofingen (2019) and Centre culturel suisse in Paris (2021), the publication MANON (in German/English/French) was released by Scheidegger & Spiess.

More information on special events and the dates of public guided tours can be found at:
fotostiftung.ch

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