

MIMICRY—EMPATHY

March 12 to June 5, 2022

Fræme
Friche la Belle de Mai
Tour Jobin, 4th Floor
Marseille

Caroline Achaintre (FR), Armin Alian (IR), BLESS (AT, DE), Ulla von Brandenburg (DE), Susanne Bürner (DE), Berta Fischer (DE), Wiktor Gutt / Waldemar Raniszewski (PL), Sofia Hultén (DE), Annette Kelm (DE), Jochen Lempert (DE), Alexandra Leykauf (DE), Sonya Schönberger (DE), Anika Schwarzlose (DE/NL), Daniel Steegmann Mangrané (ES/BR), Vera von Lehndorff / Holger Trülzsch (DE) Un projet de Susanne Bürner

A project by Susanne Bürner

As an evolving form of the Mimicry — Empathy project initiated in 2018 at the Lajevardi Foundation in Tehran (Iran), the exhibition addresses and questions the emotionally sensitive areas of mimicry as a survival strategy.

From mimicry to empathy: a balance between visual adaptation and emotional engagement

In biology, mimicry implies adaptation to a different life form, a strategy that is advantageous in certain circumstances and ultimately ensures survival. The works of Mimicry-Empathy question these adaptation mechanisms and the resulting idealised life forms.

In his Essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia”, Roger Caillois suggests that contrary to popular belief, animals blend into their surroundings not to protect themselves, but rather out of a mythological desire to dissolve into the world. It is this balance between a utilitarian purpose of becoming another and the emancipation from this very purpose that is being discussed via the works of the exhibition.

It is the film “Phasmides” by Daniel Steegmann Mangrané that follows the prime example of mimicry in insects – a family of stick insects camouflaged in different sceneries. Over the course of the film, geometric forms become organic and organic forms reveal their geometry; the living seems inanimate, and the inanimate waits for life. The recurrent figure of the stick insect evokes the possibility of an organism’s integration with its environment which is not only perfectly expressed in the phasmid’s anatomy, but also in its behavior. The evolutionary process through which animals camouflage themselves is called crypsis, from the Greek *krypticos* meaning “fit for concealing”, and refers to something that is hidden in plain sight.

Jochen Lempert’s black and white gelatine silver prints revolve around issues of seeing and being seen, and the implicit beliefs that undergird both. The artist’s ongoing investigation of the relationship between human beings and the natural world confronts and challenges anthropocentric assumptions of perception. In Lempert’s work, all creatures are presented equally. The images portray a selection of flora and fauna in various states of being; at times furtively, while at others, and other times, frontally discovered.

In the early 1970s, after Vera von Lehndorff’s body had become a public projection screen as Veruschka, the world’s highest-paid model, she decided to reappropriate her body and use it as a tool for her artistic work. In collaboration with photographer Holger Trülzsch, she practiced her merging with nature: “I wanted to be able to merge with whatever I found beautiful—usually things in nature or things for which I felt an affinity. I can remember embracing a tree in the hope that I myself would change into one.” In the photographic series “Hörzig Grotto” (1971), Vera von Lehndorff, at the height of her career and visibility as a model, disappears in a literally grotesque way into the stone walls of a cave, completely covered with gray paint.

In Sofia Hultén’s film “Grey Area” (2001), a woman dressed in gray (Hultén) resolutely attempts to merge with and dissolve into the spatial limitations of an office space. Her gray costume is color-coordinated with the surroundings in the expectation of leaving behind the restrictions of the workplace. For the eye of the beholder,

however, Hultén never becomes completely invisible. Her contours can always be made out between the furniture. Her attempts resemble a child's assumption of being undetectable in a game of hide-and-seek by holding her hands in front of her own eyes.

Questioning the original through the development of the copy

The development of mimetic strategies requires empathy in order to put oneself in the position of a system of which one wants to be part. Visual adaptation can only be created by engaging with the other's ways of thinking and strategies, blurring the boundaries between mimic and model.

Anika Schwarzlose has researched the NVA's Camouflage and Deception Department, a camouflage unit that was active during the Cold War and whose fabrication of military simulacra she has placed in the context of her own visual work. For the film "Tank" (2013), she asked Bundeswehr personnel to inflate a camouflage dummy tank, in other words, to breathe life into it. The billowing presence oscillates between animal and object and appears bare in its attempt at deception outside the context of the landscape to which it is mimetically adapted.

The photographs "Silk for V.B, A.P., B.D. and M.A." (2018) by Susanne Bürner are inspired by the work of the psychiatrist Gaetan Gatian de Clérambault on drapery. They show various hands moving between the folds of silk. The materiality suggests sensuality. However, the silk is only its own image, which becomes evident at a closer look from the edges and slits cut into the printed paper with a knife. The seduction by the material leads to frustration of the expectations one has looking at the images. The photographs hold illusion and disillusion in one.

Against a flat patterned background, Annette Kelm shows a fake 500 euro bill ("500 Euro", 2018) clamped behind a rubber band (instead of a leather strap) as if on a pegboard in a baroque trompe l'oeil painting. In this contemporary version, the usual letters and notes are replaced by a banknote. It is counterfeit money, an "illegal" trompe l'oeil of a banknote whose abolition was decided in the year of the production of Kelm's photograph, 2018, in order to make money laundering more difficult in Europe which makes the 500 euro bill doubly worthless.

Masks as an alias as well as an original

Since the Middle Ages, we have been accustomed to seeing faces as the key to a person. Oscar Wilde, however, claimed: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth". Masks allow us to become other people and yet they reveal the wearer. They are alias and original at the same time. However, the carpet masks like "Igor" (2019) by Caroline Achaintre deny us the liberating function of an alter ego. Their dimensions and materiality make it impossible to hide one's own face behind them. In contrast, they put the masking itself on display and thus present us with our monstrous sides in a mirror image.

The faces that Wiktor Gutt/Waldemar Raniszewski's slide show "Expressions on a face" (1981) presents were painted during the three-day Rockowisko rock festival 1981 in Łódź Poland. Rockowisko had become a place where the young people's political dissatisfaction was expressed in music and lyric. In the midst of a crowded audience and loud music, the artists set up a stage to offer a free face painting service to the audience which created a rather intimate physical exchange. The festival had offered a temporary sense of freedom to those who came while the face painting became their symbol of separateness from a totalitarian oppressive state.

It is believed that the wooden figures dating from 500BC to around 600AD printed on man-sized mirrors in Alexandra Leykauf's work "Stick Men" (2021) embodied gods and goddesses in Germanic and Celtic societies. They were turned from trees – with minimal interventions – into human beings to worship them as the very same gods who created men from trees. Very simple and rough carvings – like adding a mouth – create anthropomorphic figures. The idols' rather abstract quality and their printed images on mirrors where our own appearances blend with the anthropomorphic ones of the stickmen allow for space for projection and open up questions for identification.

In "Loss" (2021), Sonya Schönberger applies the ashes of her deceased friend to her face like a second skin. The empathic, appropriative act expresses her grief and her bond with her. Through a mirror on the photograph, she opens up the relationship and invites the viewer to be part of the constellation. The death mask is thus doubly

superimposed and at the same time permeable. It serves as an aid for identification as well as a protective shield. "Loss" is a homage to the friend and at the same time an extended self-portrait with death.

Abstraction as mirror

Abstraction in the sense of the rejection or dissolution of an anthropomorphic likeness throws us back on ourselves.

Armin Alian deals with the combination of the abstract and concrete dimensions of the landscape. His wall paintings, marked by a strong link to architecture, result in a hybrid space of negotiation, where the landscape is composed of a juxtaposition of distorted and stylised surfaces, provoking a dissolution of the reality we find ourselves in.

Berta Fischer's sculptures bring different synthetic materials into shapes so complex that they seem to lead the eye astray. The objects have an organic appearance as if they were elements from a fantastic landscape that seemingly hover in space defying gravity. Yet, despite their lightness and airiness, the translucent objects do not merge with the room in which they are placed. Rather, their folds prismatically reflect the space in which they are located.

Transformation—the essence of mimicry

The process of mimicry involves a transformation in relation to or in exchange with others to conform to a particular image which is considered advantageous. The exhibition suggests that the process of change is more meaningful than the image aimed at.

The layers of semi-transparent curtains by BLESS in the space before the exhibition multiply and intensify the image of the outside framed by the window. They photographically reproduce the view and at the same time, they conceal it by superimposing the same image again and again. Inside and outside are thus intertwined. Gusts of wind cause the curtains and the images to shift. It is the movement that represents the core of the threshold, a threshold in flux.

Ulla von Brandenburg's film "It Has a Golden Sun and an Elderly Grey Moon" (2016) shows a group of seven dancers who represent an abstract form of society. Colored fabrics and individualized movements to percussion sound playfully suggest various characters and their different roles within the group. A staircase is an asymmetrical stage for ritualized gestures and movements and also a ladder within society. It becomes a symbolic threshold between what we are and what we will be. In the transformative experiences of the individual within the group and mutual genuine empathy ultimately lies the potential to change society.

The works in the exhibition Mimicry—Empathy negotiate the formation of identity via the experiment of mimicry in a variety of ways. As teenagers playfully test their identity in different group affiliations, the visitor is invited to discover variations of the self in the mirror of the exhibition.

Susanne Bürner, 2022