

Biographical Forms

Construction and individual mythology



Charles Ray. *The New Beetle [El nuevo escarabajo]*, 2006
Acero pintado y poliuretano acrílico
Cortesía del artista y Matthew Marks Gallery, Nueva York

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PLACE: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid)
Edificio Sabatini. Sala A1

ORGANIZATION: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid)

CURATOR: Jean-François Chevrier

CURATOR'S ASSISTANT: Élia Pijollet

COORDINATION: Belén Díaz de Rábago, Fernando López y Natasha Goffman

History of the art is not only done by historians, but by the own artists. The aim of this exhibition is to examine the biographical forms in the modern art and will assemble 275 works (paintings, sculptures, photos, extracts of movies, etc.) from Gérard de Nerval, Edvard Munch, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Claude Cahun, Francesca Woodman, Phillip Guston or Jeff Wall, Frank Kafka, Tadeusz Kantor or Robert Bresson.

Ever since Giorgio Vasari wrote *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550-1568), the “life and work” schema has governed common and predominant practice in art history. This schema brings a sense of *coherence* to all kinds of relationships between artists’ works and biographies. It was questioned systematically during the second half of the 20th century with the development of structuralism, which had its heyday in the late 1960s. But the critique of biographical illusion can be found in an older history of modern art and poetry. In the 1920s Robert Musil, author of *The Man Without Qualities*, wrote: “In the basic relationship they have with themselves, nearly all men are narrators. They do not like poetry, or only at times. [...] What they do like is an orderly chain of events, because it has the appearance of necessity, and the feeling that their lives follow a ‘course’ gives them a kind of shelter in the midst of chaos”.

The exhibition examines the ways in which artists, like poets, endeavoured to transform the idea of the biographical account and broke with the conventions of *biographism* to elaborate freely on the basis of certain elements taken from their own life history. However, autobiography is only a limited genre within a field of experimentation that spills over the conventional boundaries of subjective experience. Franz Kafka displaces autobiography towards construction when he writes: “Writing denies itself to me. Hence plan for autobiographical investigations. Not biography but investigation and detection of the smallest possible component parts. Out of these I will then construct myself”. The idea of *biographical forms* chimes with this project of construction or reconstruction.

The historical avant-gardes favoured the life of forms and the utopian concept of the “New Man” over biography and its historical incarnations. Life “had to be changed”. But this formula was associated in Rimbaud with an *assertion*: “I is another”. This intimate otherness is the condition of an experimental individuality, whose individual mythology was a recurring form open – like the myth itself – to all sorts of symbolic transformation.

The concept of “Individual Mythologies” is a historical one. Borrowed from Romantic literary criticism, it appears in art vocabulary in the early 1960s to define the work of sculptor Étienne-Martin. It essentially describes a way of transcending the data in the civil register, as well as the chronological order of lived experience. In this, the poet Gérard de Nerval was ahead of Max Ernst and Raymond Hains. Gérard Labrunie adopted the name Nerval from a property owned by his mother’s family. The pseudonym, the first act of biographical reinvention, can be found, for example, in Claude Cahun, the artist engaged with the Surrealist movements, and in the Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT. This kind of genealogical reinvention often comes from a childhood place or from an imaginary geography. Charles Meryon’s etchings, which transfigured old Paris, were the matrix of Surrealist Paris. Dorothea Tanning reinvented the motif of the lovers’ bedroom by projecting it into a chimerical and ecstatic space.

Biographical legend, produced in the construction of an individual mythology, is a critique of biographism; it gives shape to the identity crises experienced by individuals in their various cultural and social relations of belonging. A *space of crisis* takes the place of established references. This space is outlined in a psychographic activity, it is performed, it is staged, it is literally *dramatised*. The “bio-objects” of the theatre of Tadeusz Kantor respond to the drama of life painted by Edvard Munch. The form of constructive assemblage is displayed at both extremes (Ed Templeton and Henrik Olesen), by accumulation or by reduction of the figure. Between the tableau form (Jeff Wall) and film (Robert Bresson), photography has provided many artists with the privileged support of a writing of memory, linked to the collective imaginary. In Santu Mofokeng and Ahlam Shibli, this writing is also a protestation of existence.

Artists in the exhibition:

Antonin Artaud, Louise Bourgeois, Georges Braque, Brassai (Gyula Halász), Robert Bresson, André Breton, Günter Brus, Claude Cahun, Lygia Clark, Bruce Conner, Joseph Cornell, Camille Corot, Max Ernst, Pepe Espaliú (José González Espaliú), Étienne-Martin, Walker Evans, Marina Faust, Léopold Flameng, Alberto Giacometti, Tomislav Gotovac, Philip Guston, Raymond Hains, Franz Kafka, Tadeusz Kantor, Martin Kippenberger, Paul Klee, Alfred Kubin, Henri Le Secq, Maruja Mallo, Jyvia Soma Mashe, Ludwig Meidner, Charles Meryon, Duane Michals, Santu Mofokeng, Edvard Munch, Célestin Nanteuil, Gérard de Nerval, Ocaña, Henrik Olesen, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Charles Ray, Jean Richer, Gerhard Richter, Mark Rothko, Raymond Roussel, Anne-Marie Schneider, Kurt Schwitters, Ahlam Shibli, Arpita Singh, Alina Szapocznikow, Dorothea Tanning, Ed Templeton, Claire Tenu, VALIE EXPORT, Jeff Wall y Francesca Woodman.

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