

# Menschenbilder (Images of Humanity)

What image do we make of other people? What do they tell us? How do we confront them? How do we position ourselves in relation to them based on their gender, skin color, language, or nationality? With works by twelve artists from ten countries, the exhibition *Menschenbilder (Images of Humanity)*, (October 30, 2021 – April 10, 2022) enables dialogs across continents between the most diverse identities and sensitivities. One thus encounters people in New York harbor waiting for their entry permits after fleeing war-torn Europe, comes across bizarre situations in Soviet-era Lithuania, becomes a voyeur in an English Mod club, and is confronted with the themes of puberty and gender identity. Classic nude drawings correspond with the head of a man cast in metal, which dissolves before the viewer's eyes, while a photo series of gesticulating hands of immigrants only hints at what they tell the photographer about their experiences, dreams, and hopes. The drawn profile portrait of a Black man with a red hole in his temple calls for justice. And the future is a great riddle for the young people who meet in the evening at the foot of a monument, as if on an island, in the middle of a metropolis, to support each other in their forlornness.

The positions on view in *Images of Humanity* expand the thematic spectrum revolving around the representation of humans and their diverse situations—a focal point within the collection of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg since the 1990s with key works by, among others, Christian Boltanski, Cindy Sherman, Bruce Nauman and Elizabeth Peyton—and extend this into our immediate present with newly added works.



Clemens Kalischer, *2 Girls Between Luggage*, 1948

**Clemens Kalischer** (1921–2018) traveled the world, photographing people for the most part from the distance and capturing their lives. He was drawn to remote regions such as Val Grana in northern Italy, among other places; but more than anything else, he was repeatedly fascinated by the hustle and bustle of New York, where he photographed the arrival of Holocaust survivors who had fled Europe. Kalischer poignantly captured these *Displaced Persons* in New York Harbor in 1947/48: In a drafty waiting hall, two girls talk joyfully to each other, while two tired

and exhausted-looking older women sit wordlessly on their suitcases with their backs turned to each other. For Kalischer, *Displaced Persons* was a personal project: He could empathize with the fate of the homeless people. When he was twelve years old, he emigrated with his Jewish family from Berlin to Paris in 1933; only a few years later, he was sent to a French internment camp as a forced laborer. In 1942, he managed to escape to the United States, which became his new home. Kalischer's photographs were featured in the legendary exhibition *The Family of Man*, conceived for The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955.



Antanas Sutkus, *Untitled*, 1970

With his humanistic photography, **Antanas Sutkus** (b. 1939) documented the life of people in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), which was a member state of the Soviet Union from 1940 to 1990. Interest in the different life stories and a deeply connected sympathy for the fate of his fellow human beings are the basis of his detailed black-and-white photographs, which depict everyday scenes of ordinary people and their individual stories. They are based not least of all on emotional connections with his surroundings. Antanas Sutkus often photographed people from his close environment. His own life also left traces in his works. After his father shot himself when Sutkus was less than a year old, he was raised by his grandparents. At the age of six, he contracted tuberculosis, a disease for which there was no treatment at the time. Fates such as that of Antanas Sutkus were not uncommon, but pictures of lonely, sick, or poor people were not allowed to be displayed publicly in the Lithuanian SSR. Many of his photos therefore had to remain (initially) unpublished.

With his work, the Ghanaian artist **Serge Attukwei Clottey** (b. 1985) deals with themes that run through both his personal life and the recent history of Africa. The drama of displacement and uncontrolled migration, as well as the growing awareness of one's own power have created the environment in which Serge Attukwei Clottey's drawings, wall works, and performances could emerge.

“The ritual and spiritual character of his works does not prevent the artist from dealing with the mundane problems of Ghanaian society. The ominous drawings reflect on the corruption in the country, injustice towards women, and other types of social inequality. In the performances Serge Attukwei Clottey often puts on with the GoLokal collective, which he founded a few years ago together with artist friends, he attacks traditional gender roles, the ineffectiveness of local politics, and post-colonial power structures.” (Marie Meyerding)



Serge Attukwei Clottey, *Queer notion of justice*, 2018

For her artistic work, the photographer **Ute Behrend** (b. 1961) combines photographs into pairs of images (diptychs) that at first glance do not suggest any connection. This is also the case in the series *Girls, Some Boys and Other Cookies*. The diptychs depict portraits of children and young people in combination with objects or landscapes. Clichés play a major role in the combined images; many seem exaggerated and ironic. A recurring theme in the works of Ute Behrend is puberty, whereby she often associates the development from child to adult with transformation processes from fairy tales. She describes her intention in combining the images as follows: “A perfect image creates a tension for me when I look at it. Sometimes I see a moment and think it’s perfect, but after I take the picture, I realize something is missing. If I put another picture next to it, then I can fill in that missing part.” In this way, the associations with the individual motifs that arise in the viewer’s mind can lead to new contexts and stories of their own.



Ute Behrend, *2 Schwäne / Tanzendes Mädchen*, 1995

In her seven-part photo series from 1997 and 1998, **Rebecca Lewis** (b. 1970) deals with the British subculture of the so-called Mods, a short form that stands for



Rebecca Lewis, *Lord Lord, March*, 98, 1998

Modernists. The origins of the Mods can be traced back to youths who belonged to the working class and the (lower) middle class in Great Britain in the 1960s. They drew cultural and aesthetic references primarily from French cinema, Italian fashion of the time, and various African American-influenced musical styles such as jazz, soul, and R’n’B. The Mods photographed by Rebecca Lewis, in turn, refer to the early days of this subculture, starting in the late 1990s. They are partly staged in their own apartments but are also portrayed partying in clubs. Lewis succeeds in portraying the diverse characters, individual styles, and preferences in and with her precisely composed photographs. At the same time, Mods have always been part of a common collective, united by aesthetic as well as habitual codes that cite the 1960s with great attention to detail: Clothing, hair, styling, and poses, as well as the passion for Vespas, music, and club culture connect all protagonists. These are scenes of a fascinating lifestyle, which Rebecca Lewis captures in colorful and formally impressive photographs.



Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *Casting Portraits*, 1995–97

As the title *Casting Portraits* suggests, these portraits were taken in connection with a film production. For her film *If 6 Was 9* (1995), the Finnish artist **Eija-Liisa Ahtila** (b. 1959) explained to high school students in Helsinki her plan to make a photo series and film about adolescent women and sex. Twenty-four girls expressed interest, six of whom were photographed. The photos proved to be a valuable resource for developing the script, as they helped Eija-Liisa Ahtila to understand the girls’ attitudes and behavior. Two of the girls subsequently appeared in the film, which was also realized as a video installation. Oscillating between documentary and complex fiction, this three-projection work has been described by Eija-Liisa Ahtila as a “video installation on a split screen about teenagers and sex.” In the installation, five teenage girls talk about their sexual dreams and desires in five coordinated monologues. As in Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s other projects, the question here is what constitutes a person’s identity and how and by what this is formed.



What is gender? And how should people's gender identity be defined or classified as a social category in terms of their self-perception, self-esteem, or role behavior? The Indian artist **Tejal Shah** (b. 1979) deals with these and other questions revolving around the topic of gender diversity. She represents one of the most radical positions in Indian contemporary art and deals in her works with unconventional concepts of being a woman. The artist herself describes her work as feminist, queer, and political. To this day, the image of women in India corresponds to a strictly conservative worldview. For the series *Women Like Us*, Tejal Shah portrayed women who do not fit into the social construct of being a woman and who are confronted with questions such as "Are you a boy or a girl?" or "What are you?" The artist's goal is to educate and break down prejudices against those living outside conventions in order to improve their difficult living conditions in Indian society.



Tejal Shah, *Women Like Us*, 2010

**Otto Piene** (1928–2014), one of the three co-founders of the artist group ZERO, is best known for his elaborate kinetic light installations, fire paintings, and ceramics. By way of contrast, the exhibition *Images of Humanity* features rarely shown nude drawings that stand in close relation to his fire paintings from the same creative period. The two untitled nude drawings (1974–76) by Otto Piene exhibited in the context of *Images of Humanity* are striking for their gestural hatching, blurring, and erasure, which allow conclusions to be drawn about the formal process of creating the graphite drawings. The graphite preferred by Otto Piene for its painterly qualities seems particularly suitable for lending the drawings dynamism and liveliness. The deep dark graphite layers, applied and removed in powerful, overlapping strokes covering the entire surface, seem to literally pulsate on



Otto Piene, *Ohne Titel*, 1975

the surface of the drawing cardboard. This technique, which Otto Piene called "black-light modulation", causes the depicted figures to suggest a spatial plasticity, since his nude drawings are primarily concerned with "the interpretation of body temperatures and physio-psychic tensions" (Otto Piene).



Anna Malagrida, *Les Mains*, 2016

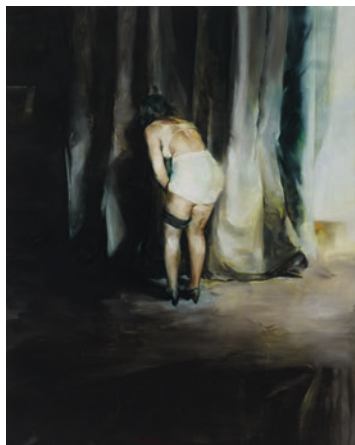
**Anna Malagrida** (b. 1970) created her photo series *Les Mains* as part of a project titled *Christal House*, consisting of photographs, texts, and a video. Named after a racehorse, the project addresses the situation of people who regularly frequent the betting office across the street from the Centre Pompidou in Paris, where the works were subsequently exhibited. With the title *Christal House*, Anna Malagrida not only refers to the business field of the betting shops that her protagonists populate but also to the fragility of the bettors' hopes and dreams based on betting. The bettors she interviewed were predominantly North African migrants who, dreaming of a better life, were lured to the metropolis of Paris from all parts of the world. The subject of dreaming and the hope inherent in all gambling unfold in the image of the migrant, with the betting office becoming transformed into a theater of hope.



Christian Keinstar, *Simplifikation*, 2017

With his work *Simplifikation*, **Christian Keinstar** (b. 1975) devotes himself to one of the most fascinating topoi in art history: the artistic self-portrait. The artist's image, which is executed as a metal casting, conveys the impression of permanence. The metal, however, is gallium, a material of the so-called rare earths that is increasingly gaining topicality both politically and economically. Gallium has the property of melting at 29.8 degrees Celsius. *Simplifikation* proves to be a multi-layered and fascinating work of art because it combines a sculptural setting with a temporal experience: One can watch the

head melting as if in a slow-motion shot. What seemed to give the artist's head the character of eternity in its uniqueness dissolves inexorably. The transience of (one's own) being thus becomes the primary message of the work.



François Jacob, *Actrice*, 2017

With his almost old-masterly executed paintings, the Brussels-born artist **François Jacob** (b. 1976) creates disquieting situations reminiscent of theater scenes “in which people seem to be trapped like marionettes in a grotesque role-play, the cast of characters of which is unknown” (Bettina Haiss). François Jacob places his protagonists, who are often dressed in costumes and accompanied by props, in gloomy pictorial spaces that create an underlying melancholy mood. The half-dressed *Actrice* (Actress), who is caught from behind by the cone of a spotlight on a stage, has no idea that she is being watched, as she herself is far too captivated by what she sees through a hole in the theater curtain. What exactly she sees there remains hidden from the viewers of the picture, as does the context of action in which the actress finds herself. It thus also remains open whether and for what she is dressing, undressing, or changing her clothes, and the viewers thus remain trapped in their voyeuristic gaze.



Sylvain Couzinet-Jacques, *Sub Rosa*, 2017–2020

The finale of the exhibition is the audiovisual installation *Sub Rosa*, the title of which refers to the Latin phrase for “under the seal of secrecy.” **Sylvain Couzinet-Jacques** (b. 1983) presents an atmospheric image of the young people in Spain known as the “lost generation,” who are

affected by one of the highest youth unemployment rates in Europe. For more than two years, Sylvain Couzinet-Jacques filmed—each time at the hour of dusk—the young adults who gather on Plaza de la Moncloa in Madrid around the Arco de la Victoria, a triumphal arch built as a gesture of victory by the fascist dictator Franco. In fragmentary, emotionally charged images, which he projects time-delayed and in slow motion onto slanted sections of wall, accompanied by a sound generator, he captures the young people in their behavior, which is characterized by brokenness, superficiality, narcissism, loneliness, and contradictions, and thus paints an impressive portrait of the disorientation of this generation. *Sub Rosa* reveals familiarity and affection among the youth, but also latent aggression and melancholy. In the midst of the images, a band of text on a belt of the young protagonists flashes programmatically: “CREATE THE FUTURE”.

All works on view in the exhibition have been added to the collection of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg between 2019 and 2021, most of them as donations. Our sincere thanks go to the Friends of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and the private donors who have enriched our collection with their generous gifts.

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#### *Opening Hours*

Tuesday – Sunday

11:00 am – 6:00 pm

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