



MASK

In Present-Day Art

1 September 2019 - 5 January 2020

Masks are one of the human cult objects with the longest, richest and at the same time most controversial history. In the interplay between showing and veiling, masks are highly topical in contemporary society and culture as well. The international group show *MASK. In Present-Day Art* at Aargauer Kunsthau explores the issue in 160 current works of art.

When thinking of masks, we think of Carnival, African tribal rituals or death masks, theatre, film and fashion - of role playing, changing identities, veiling and protection. Masks are one of the human cult objects with the longest, richest and at the same time most controversial history. They also have an extensive tradition in the fine arts. But how is the subject of the mask treated in contemporary art? The international group show **MASK. In Present-Day Art** explores this issue in depth.

MASK shows that contemporary artists are interested in the mask not only as an object but also very much in its social, cultural, political and symbolic implications. In the interplay between showing and veiling and in a society in which adroit self-presentation is seen as a measure of personal success, the mask today is once again a subject of high topicality.

Masks, physical and symbolic masks, are omnipresent - as much in the real as in the virtual world. We encounter forms of masquerading as a means of subverted socially standardised gender and role assignments. But we also encounter them in social media where, with just a few mouse clicks, the original image is transformed in a matter of seconds. We put on masks to slip into a role; they allow us to change into a new self. In the media, masks sometimes appear as a sombre symbol of the turbulent global situation. We see masked protestors, Occupy Wallstreet activists with typical Guy Fawkes masks, hooded terrorists and soldiers in protective masks.

Thirty-six artists from twelve countries turn to a fascinating topic in **MASK** and subject both the concept and the object to an analysis and reevaluation from a present-day perspective. On view are some 160 works, most of them

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created in the past ten years in a variety of media, including photography, painting, installation, sculpture and video.

Artists are interested less in psychologizing what is *behind* the mask than in looking at the mask itself: they address the mask as an artistic or ritual object, as a means of (virtual) self-presentation or political expression or as a tool for playing with different identities.

Approaches to the subject vary widely. Some artists reinterpret the nature of the mask. In her series *Nomads* (2007/2008) **Laura Lima** (b. 1971 Governador Valadares, BR) presents masks whose faces show painted landscapes rather than human features. In the exhibition they hang on the wall, but they may also be worn. When a person puts one on, the effect is rather surreal and inherently liberating. Because rather than looking at a face, we look into a (pictorial) space, possibly the vision of a mindscape.

However, the masks created by artists are often not intended to be put on. This may be obvious based on the material - for example, unfired clay in the case of **Sabian Baumann** (b. 1962 Zug, CH) - or the dimensions. Thus, **Amanda Ross-Ho** (b. 1975 Chicago, USA) creates huge, inflated interpretations of cosmetic face masks.

Strictly speaking, a mask fulfils its original function only when it is worn and takes the place of the human face. A whole string of artists is concerned with the various form of masking. Common to the works of both **Gillian Wearing** (b. 1963 Birmingham, UK) and **Douglas Gordon** (b. 1966 Glasgow, UK) is the reflection on (one's own) transitoriness. They pose grand philosophical questions like "Who am I?" and "What makes me the person I am today?" At the same time, the intersection between self-portrait and mask is exemplarily evident in them. In his work *Monster* (1996/1997) Gordon uses the simplest of means to transform his face with adhesive tape into a monster mask, while Wearing elaborately produces silicon masks in *Self Portrait as My Mother Jean Gregory* (2003) behind which she almost completely disappears.

John Stezaker (b. 1949 Worcester, UK) is also interested in the mechanisms of veiling and hiding in his collages. In *Mask [Film Portrait Collage] CLXXIII* (2014), he applies old postcards of landscapes as eye masks to the immaculate faces of film actors. In the professional film star portraits, the actors present a perfect façade, an impersonal mask whose masking in Stezaker's work ironically seems to reveal potential psychological abysses.

Maskings break with the habit of reading faces as a key to the nature of people. This may create an irritating and sometimes even threatening effect, as, for instance, in the performance of **Sislej Xhafa** (b. 1970 Peja, KO), which involves orchestras. The balaclavas worn by the musicians anonymise them and create a feeling of insecurity, which contrasts with the performance of the emotional piece *Adagio for Strings* by Samuel Barber. In cooperation with Argovia Philharmonic, the piece *Again and Again* (2000-2019) will be

performed on the day of the opening of **MASK** in Aarau. The artist determines the location of the performance in response to the context he finds; the work is thus developed further in Aarau.

The topicality of the subject is particularly evident in works where the artists use masks as a central motif in the virtual world. Social media provide a huge playing field and testing ground for masking and the juggling of identities. **Susanne Weirich** (b. 1962 Unna, DE) arranges the selfie films of an online community into a tableau vivant in her multimedia installation *Global Charcoal Challenge* (2018). **Olaf Breuning** (b. 1970 Schaffhausen, CH) focuses on the most concise way to visualise an emotional state, the emoji, in his digitally compiled, wallpaper-mounted collage *Emojis* (2014).

Finally, artists refer to the cultural history of the mask. The textile wall piece *World Mask* (2014) by **Christoph Hefti** (b. 1967 Lausanne, CH) is an eclectic ride through various cultural spheres as well as types of masks which serve ritual, spiritual or carnivalesque purposes. **Simon Starling's** (b. 1967 Epsom, UK) references point to Japanese Nō masks, among other things. The video *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)* (2010-2011) shows a mask carver creating masks in his workshop, which we re-encounter as original artefacts in Starling's installation. Based on a sixteenth-century stage play about false and double identities, he develops a narrative revolving around Henry Moore's 1964-1966 bronze sculpture *Nuclear Energy*. The collages of **Kader Attia** (b. 1970 Dugny, FR) also offer a contemporary and critical look at how people deal with mask traditions. The artist provokingly contrasts historical photographs of mutilated soldiers' faces with anthropological mask objects.

The **MASK** exhibition is conceived as an associative tour and the varying approaches are presented in a way that is multi-faceted, like the subject itself. The works included offer impressive evidence of the fascination the subject exerts on contemporary art (and its audience) as well as of its complexity and depths. The image of the mask is obviously a rich breeding ground in that it offers artists a wide range of opportunities to reflect on the present.

Artists

Kader Attia (b. 1970, FR), Silvia Bächli (b. 1956, CH) & Eric Hattan (b. 1955, CH), Sabian Baumann (b. 1962, CH), Nathalie Bissig (b. 1981, CH), Olaf Breuning (b. 1970, CH), Edson Chagas (b. 1977, AO), Hélène Delprat (b. 1957, FR), Cecilia Edefalk (b. 1954, SE), Nicole Eisenman (b. 1965, FR), Theaster Gates (b. 1973, USA), Gauri Gill (b. 1970, IN), Douglas Gordon (b. 1966, UK), Aneta Grzeszykowska (b. 1974, PL), Christoph Hefti (b. 1967, CH), Judith Hopf (b. 1969, DE), Cameron Jamie (b. 1969, USA), Laura Lima (b. 1971, BR), Christian Marclay (b. 1955, CH), Mélodie Mousset (b. 1981, FR/CH), Mike Nelson (b. 1967, UK), Elodie Pong (b. 1966, USA/CH), Pope.L (b. 1955, USA), Ugo Rondinone (b. 1964, CH), Amanda Ross-Ho (b. 1975, USA), Markus Schinwald (b. 1973, AT), Cindy Sherman (b. 1954, USA), Francisco Sierra (b. 1977, CH), Simon Starling (b. 1967, UK), John Stezaker (b. 1949, UK), Rosemarie Trockel

(b. 1952, DE), Paloma Varga Weisz (b. 1966, DE), Gillian Wearing (b. 1963, UK), Susanne Weirich (b. 1962, DE), Pedro Wirz (b. 1981, BR/CH), Sislej Xhafa (b. 1970, KO)

Curators

Madeleine Schuppli, Director Aargauer Kunsthaus, in collaboration with Yasmin Afschar, Curator Aargauer Kunsthaus

Curatorial Assistant

Luca Rey, research intern Aargauer Kunsthaus

Publication

In conjunction with the exhibition, a richly illustrated volume (in German and English) is published. Edited by Madeleine Schuppli, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau, with introductory essays by Madeleine Schuppli and Yasmin Afschar and texts on the artists in the exhibition by Yasmin Afschar, Dr. Daniel Berndt, Emily Butler, Hendrik Bündge, Wendy Chang, Michelle Cotton, Peter Fischer, Claire Hoffmann, Olivier Kaeser, Dr. Melitta Kliege, Susanna Koeberle, Elsy Lahner, Leo Lencsés, Bettina Mühlebach, Dr. Lena Nievers, Luca Rey, Hemant Sareen, Dr. Jörg Scheller, Madeleine Schuppli, Dr. Angela Stercken, Thomas D. Trummer. Design by Atelier Pol. 312 pp. Scheidegger & Spiess, Zürich 2019 ISBN: 978-3-85881-645-0

CHF 49.- (CHF 42.- for members of the Aargau Art Association)

Limited Edition Issued by the Aargau Art Association

The artist and designer Christoph Hefti creates a silk foulard exclusively in connection with the **MASK** exhibition. *Detailed information will be available on the website.*

Acknowledgments

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Preview for the Media

Friday, 30 August, 10.30 am

Introduction and tour of the special exhibition **MASK. In Present-Day Art** with Madeleine Schuppli, Director Aargauer Kunsthaus

Exhibition Opening

Saturday, 31 August

4 pm, performance by Sislej Xhafa

In cooperation with Argovia Philharmonic, Kosovar artist Sislej Xhafa presents a new adaptation of his performance *Again and Again* (2000-2019), which he developed especially for the exhibition MASK.

Meet in front of the Aargauer Kunsthaus

Please register by email to anlaesse.kunsthaus@ag.ch

Starting at 6 pm Speeches

See the invitation to the exhibition opening

5 - 6 pm Preview

Exclusive preview for sponsors and members of the Aargau Art Association

6 - 8 pm Children's Opening

Meet at the studio downstairs at 6 pm (ages 5-13)

Events

Swiss Performance Award

Saturday, 21 September, from approx. 11 am

The 2019 Swiss Performance Award takes place at the Aargauer Kunsthaus in cooperation with the Aargauer Kuratorium. An all-afternoon programme throughout the Kunsthaus offers opportunities to discover the diversity and quality of Swiss performance art.

Finalists: Camille Alena (Fribourg), Manifesto Reflex Collective (Basel), Raphaëlle Mueller (Geneva), Romy Rügger (Zürich), Davide-Christelle Sanvee (Geneva), Steven Schoch (Basel), Julie Semoroz (Geneva)

For additional information please visit <https://performanceaward.ch>

Free admission

Curator-Guided Tour

Thursday, 31 October, 6.30 pm

with Madeleine Schuppli, Director Aargauer Kunsthaus

Admission

Fritz Hauser - Schraffur [Hatching] for the Aargauer Kunsthaus

Friday, 1 November, 6 and 7.30 pm

Saturday, 2 November, 6 and 7.30 pm

A project by Künstlerhaus Boswil in cooperation with Aargauer Kunsthaus. In dialogue with the exhibition, the percussionist and composer Fritz Hauser fills the Kunsthaus with sound: a spectacular collective performance involving 100 performers.

CHF 35.- (CHF 25.- for members of the Aargau Art Association and people qualifying for reduced admission)

MASK Film Festival

Saturday, 9 November, afternoon

A one-day festival focusing on the mask in film, from experimental films to horror blockbusters, curated and with commentary by Michael Sennhauser, film editor at SRF

Simon Starling: Lecture and Talk (in English)

Tuesday, 3 December, 6.30 pm

The British artist and Turner Prize winner discusses the video installation *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)* (2010-2011) with Madeleine Schuppli, Director Aargauer Kunsthaus. Followed by a reception
Admission + CHF 10.-

A number of additional events are being planned. Starting at the end of August, the complete programme can be found in a separate event flyer as well as on our website at www.aargauerkunsthaus.ch/veranstaltungen

Numerous **guided tours and art education events** for children, youth, families and schools accompany the exhibition. See the flyer or visit our website at www.aargauerkunsthaus.ch

Images for the Media

Images related to the exhibition are available for downloading on our website www.aargauerkunsthaus.ch> Media. Please consider the copyright. Upon request, we gladly provide additional images. Email: christina.omlin@ag.ch

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