

Human Condition Empathy and Emancipation in Precarious Times

Works

Susan Philipsz

Born 1965 in Glasgow (GB),
lives and works in Berlin (DE)

Susan Philipsz sees sound and space as components of sculpture. Performing and staging Radiohead's *Pyramid Song* a capella, she adopts its depressive mood, condensing it with an intensity that turns the architectural and public space into a visual element. In an infinite loop, she fills the space with her voice, enveloping the watching listeners with uncomfortable eeriness, though this mutates into something familiar and comforting with the constant repetition.

Adrian Paci

Born 1969 in Shkoder (AL),
lives and works in Milan (IT)

Per Speculum

Children stare emotionlessly but reproachfully at us out of an idyllic landscape. The bare reflection, the mirrored illusion, breaks up and is suddenly shattered into individual pieces. The children disappear in an old tree, scattered about it like the mirror shards they take with them. They catch the sunlight, and dazzle the people looking up at them and the camera photographing them. Taken in and blinded, we are left exposed to the fragility of human existence, just as children are helplessly exposed to systems disrupted by war. Human perception is often dazzled and taken in. Deliberately or unconsciously, being and doing often look distorted as action. Do we only see what we want to see? Are we what we do?

Electric Blue

The film *Electric Blue* is a survival story set in the economical and political wreck that was Albania in the 1990s. A once dedicated film-maker opens a porn cinema and begins to hire out videocassettes to keep his family from starving. Business goes well. There is a steady stream of men coming in to rent cassettes. Paci shows their faces close-up, documenting their longings and modest opportunities to extract joy from the harsh hopelessness of everyday life. One day,

he notices that his son watches the films, and he begins to destroy the material. He over-records cassette after cassette with news images showing destruction, bombing and war. War wipes out porn. Not entirely, though. When he later shows his war documentation to a friend, he notices that scenes of sexual activities still turn up from time to time.

TURN ON

Eighteen unemployed men sit well spread out on steps in Paci's home town Shkoder, in northern Albania. In turn, they switch on their simple petrol engines, turning on light bulbs that the men hold in their hands close to their bodies. The tired, demoralized faces avoid the probing eye of the camera. Their quiet actions draw our attention to two major problems in Albania – unemployment and the regular power cuts. Loudness and movement come only from the generators, their noise overshadowing the delicate light. The hopelessness that brings the men to this spot anyway is condensed by Paci into a close-up of reason, faith and sympathy.

Marcel Dzama

Born 1974 in Winnipeg (CA),
lives and works in Brooklyn,
New York (US)

Marcel Dzama creates abstruse dream worlds. Using drawings, collages or dioramas, he relates grisly horror stories that lay bare realms of the human psyche, whose subconscious seems to be deep black. His grotesques are partly living creatures familiar from fairy tales – bats, people in various bear or bird costumes, and soldiers. *Pip* is one of his protagonists, seen life-size. Dressed in a suit and tie, he grows and grows with his long furry neck. The stories that Dzama tells often draw on American history and contemporary politics. The theme of war is of key importance in this as an apocalyptic scenario. In *Ulysses*, the drama is condensed into a bloodbath in a long, long comic, showing in its unvarnished Dadaist execution the puppet-like players in a world completely devoid of humans.

Mark Manders

Born 1968 in Volkel (NL),
lives and works in Arnhem (NL)
and Ronse (BE)

Self-Portrait as a Building is the name of Mark Manders's extensive life's project, in which he tells his story by assembling objects into various spatial configurations. The Mark Manders art-figure thus depicted is generally different from Mark Manders the real person, and is constantly reformulated in the interstice between fiction and reality. Imaginary spaces and visible gaps are fuel for thought, and are filled out into a self-portrait with stories of human existence. The figures he formulates come across as archaic, seeming more like static shells than flesh and bone, apparently now devoid of life.

Two Interconnected Houses functions as a series of slides. Image after image, scene after scene unfolds that is supposedly familiar but in truth turn out to be wholly alien. Divided houses and figures become symbols of alternating absence and presence, everyday life and myth. Who are we?

Maria Lassnig

Born 1919 in Kappel am Krappfeld, Carinthia (AT), lives and works in Vienna (AT) and Carinthia (AT)

All her life, Maria Lassnig's subject matter has been herself, her body, her physical sensations and the representation of her deepest private emotions, which constantly change. The self-portraits function like snapshots of her self-determined, egocentric existence. In the search for ways to represent her own ego as a body made of flesh and bone as much as a sentient entity, this sensitive introversion finds a form of expression that reveals fragility and vulnerability to us – even if it is as a female Laokoön fighting the sea monster single-handedly by herself without support, or petrified to a red still life.

Lida Abdul

Born 1973 in Kabul (AF), lives and works in Kabul (AF), California (US), and Europe

“Here,” believes Lida Abdul, “are the ruins of my homeland, my history and my culture. I don't accept it, which is why I shout it aloud with a beauty that hurts.” Her works are notable for a clear, poetic style, a radiant purity and perfection that she has used as a tool to reflect everyday life in Afghanistan, which has been a theatre of war continuously since 1979. Ruins are a recurrent motif in her films and quiet witnesses of it. In *White House*, she paints the bombed-out house white, purifying it symbolically from its guilt at not being able to provide anyone with shelter any more, formulating it into a monument of shock. She herself is dressed entirely in black, taking a risk as a woman and artist in an Islamic republic by showing herself with groomed beauty without a veil while painting. As always, it is men who fight the wars. Abdul paints them white, gets them to tear down ruins or sink in self-destruction armed as heroes with a flag, as ‘men in the sea’. In *In Transit*, her main actors are children, who use an old Soviet plane left grounded. They live their lives very directly in front of our eyes with the remains of destruction in all their ordinariness.

Renzo Martens

Born 1973 in Sluiskil (NL),
lives and works in Amsterdam
(NL), Brussels (BE) and
Kinshasa (CD)

Renzo Martens operates at the frontier. With great immediacy, he draws attention to phenomena of a globalized world that simulate empathy between fake and staged media truth, and bogus documentation. When do images of another poorer or war-torn world move us? Is it TV entertainment that doesn't touch us? Who do we feel sorry for, looking at these pictures? The people suffering, or ourselves, because we actually can't abide these pictures? Do I have to put up with all that?

Episode 1 and *Episode 3* need to be seen from beginning to end for a serious, thorough appreciation, and allow no coming and going. The apparent superficiality with which Renzo Martens puts himself in the centre of the picture brings out the boundless exhibitionism of sensation-hungry reportage. "Enjoy the poverty," he writes in neon letters into the night about the celebration. Not because he is trying to be funny but because aid organizations never show happy poverty. Tears are needed for good pictures, not really a self-determined life. Looking at other people's suffering means there are people who live from other people's suffering and take empathetic stances. Renzo Martens challenges the victims to depict themselves suffering so that they make money from it. Who is responsible for whom, and in what way? How do we manage life? How do we manage pictures?

Kris Martin

Born 1972 in Kortrijk (BE),
lives in Ghent (BE)

The ancient Laokoön sculpture now in the Vatican Museums is probably the best-known representation of a death struggle in art. In it, Laokoön and his sons are shown completely at the mercy of the huge, all-enveloping sea serpent. Kris Martin has made a full-size plaster copy of the sculpture, but leaves out the serpent. The death struggle leaves the writhing male bodies in their idealized classical beauty as the sole occupants of the foreground. The great human themes of pain and suffering, crime and punishment, conflict and death are presented by Martin by means of lacunae that make an imminent apocalypse difficult to take in. The enemy is invisible and invulnerable, yet the danger it represents remains immanent in the visible lacuna. Bells are bells that mutually prevent each other from striking. In total accord, they occupy each other's sound space, stopping each other from sounding signals. Inhibited and crippled, they are ensnared in their inactivity, and offer a simple yet oppressive symbol of human conditions.