

**CENTRE 7
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fondation suisse pour la culture

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MANON

exhibition from 9 May to 18 July 2021

FOR PRESS + PROFESSIONALS

FRI	07.05.2021	10 AM - 1 PM
SAT	08.05.2021	2 - 7 PM

curator: Claire Hoffmann

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The CCS is part of the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia.



MANON

A trailblazer on the Swiss performance and art scene since the mid-1970s, Swiss artist Manon (*1940, lives and works in Zurich) is a seemingly inexhaustible source of thought-provoking radical social commentary. Her subversive way of tackling shifts in society, feminism, and the sexual revolution resonates with the current debate on hierarchical power relations and notions of identity, particularly gender identity.

Her photographic series and photo-performances reflect the gradual elaboration and metamorphosis of her persona—Manon. The figure presents itself—or she presents herself—in serial masquerades of potential identities, and variously as a sexualized body, an androgynous character, or a cross-dresser (*La dame au crâne rasé*, 1977–78; *Elektrokardiogramm 303/304*, 1979). More recently, her self-portraits are pervaded by fragility, age, and illness (*Borderline*, 2007; *Hôtel Dolores*, 2008). This tension between intimate space and its dramatization, personal experience and artificial appearances was the base note in her first ever work, *Das lachsfarbene Boudoir* (The Salmon-Pink Boudoir, 1974). The luxuriant cosmos bursting with rhinestones, lingerie, feather boas, and fetishes, a sheer explosion of encoded hyper-femininity, was her own bedroom.

Manon also pioneered the practice of performance as a staged tableau or installation, creating immersive environments or edgy voyeuristic scenarios to investigate male-female power dynamics, exhibitionism, and role reversal. Inter alia, she has locked herself up with visitors for an eye-to-eye interrogation, posed in chains as a captive femme fatale, and put six men in a store window display, as objects of desire.

Manon chose her name in order to be rid of her father's (or husband's) surname, allying herself instead with feminism's second wave, which reclaimed the body and sexuality by performative means. To this day, she deploys provocative readings of female existence as a feminist strategy, challenging heteronormative roles and constraints, and exploring how the gaze can make or break patterns of objectification and power shifts.

In addition to her work of photography and large-scale installation, Manon continues to fathom her field of existential inquiry by writing every day.

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Biography

Extraits adaptés du texte de Brigitte Ulmer et Sandro Fischli publié dans *Manon*, Scheidegger & Spiess, 2019

Manon, born Rosmarie Küng in Bern in 1940, grew up in St. Gallen. She moved into a hotel at the age of fifteen and attended the Kunstgewerbeschule in St. Gallen. She worked as a stylist, graphic artist, window dresser, fashion illustrator, and designer, before she starting to work with photography in the early 1970s. She explored self-portraits from photo vending machines and glamorous self-promotion in changing styles and intricate settings that she worked out together with her husband Urs Lüthi, with whom she particularly explored the fields of androgyny and travesty. Among her first photo series, there are *Polaroids* (1973-1974) and *Fetischbilder* (Fetish Pictures, 1974) followed by numerous photo-performances including *La dame au crâne rasé* (The Lady with the Shaved Head, 1977/78), in which she constructed an identity in flux. The photo-series *Einst war sie MISS RIMINI* (She Was Once MISS RIMINI, 2003) continued her work on the theme of identity construction, as *Edgar* (2006), in which she slipped into the skin of a male alter-ego.

The artist's large-format color portraits in the series *Borderline* (2007) are extremely direct self-examinations. In 2008 Manon began work on a new photo series entitled *Hotel Dolores*, consisting of photos from three defunct health resorts in Baden. She changed their spaces, walls, wallpaper, and walls through minor and major interventions, and thus let their stories be told. Since 2004, she has been working on a continuing photo cycle *Diaries*, which above all sounds out her personal realm of experience.

In parallel, Manon creates immersive environments, which often give a rise to performances. Her first installation *Das lachsfarbene Boudoir* (The Salmon-Pink Boudoir, 1974) is inspired of her bedroom under roof on Augustinergasse in Zurich; a universe filled with fetish objects, feathers and glittery materials. Her largest environment to date: *Reise nach Siberien* (Journey to Siberia, 2015) created a cooling house, a morgue, which embraced the audience in an icy cold, for the Kunsthaus Interlaken. In the spring of 2018 she created *Der Wachsaal* (Observation Room) for the Galerie Last Tango in Zurich.

Manon's major solo exhibition at Helmhaus Zürich in 2008 was shown one year later at the Swiss Institute in New York. Still in 2008, the artist was honored with the Prix Meret Oppenheim and the prize of the Fontana-Gränacher Stiftung. In 2013, Manon received the Grosser Kulturpreis (Grand Cultural Prize) of the City of St. Gallen.

Manon also works with sampling, that is, quoting from art and film history, news-paper clippings, etc. A first selection of her writings was published in *Federn / Feathers* in 2020.

Manon currently lives and works in Zurich.

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On the Ground of Existence by Claire Hoffmann

text published in *Manon*, Scheidegger & Spiess, 2019

Manon brought a snippet of salmoncolored satin to a meeting where we were working on the exhibition. The baldachin draped over the salmoncolored boudoir should be in this hue, and it needs to be re-sewn for each spatial situation in accordance with the ceiling height of the exhibition site. Manon had already sought precisely this shade in this flowing, shiny material in vain when creating the boudoir in 1974, but was finally able to find it at the large Marché Saint Pierre in Paris. And now again, she discovered it also in a textile market in Paris. As Manon explains, *Das lachsfarbene Boudoir* (The Salmon-Pink Boudoir) was her first work, her “point zero.” Just a few years later, Manon spent a crucial phase of her life in Paris (1977–1980). Here the iconic photo series originated showing a young woman with a shaved head posing night after night, disguised and transformed; in front of a trompe l’oeil tile wall; wearing a fur coat in a stairwell; on a rooftop terrace, where her shaved skull stood out against the high rises of the thirteen districts; at Susi Wyss’s place, her friend and glamour icon, whose apartment (including cats) Manon took care of when Wyss was away. For her first solo exhibition in Paris, more than forty years later, these mirroring moments with the camera along with the powdery, satiny cocoon are essential. Manon places her past takeover of sites and her environments into the basilicalike exhibition space of the Centre culturel suisse. Also new works are presented, showing different sites and atmospheres, which display a disarming intimacy, physical presence, and simultaneous severity, tying in with the earlier work—while fully recognizing the leap in time that lies between.

Next meeting in Zurich, at the lake where the artist sits every morning by the water with her notebook. She writes, contemplates, senses she is in the right place, refuels, gains energy from working. Manon invites us here to continue our discussion about the exhibition project. From leafing through proposals for the book cover and the issue of laying a tiled linoleum floor in the exhibition spaces, the talk soon slides into a different terrain. From the organizational banter over the physical, financial, and temporal framework conditions, a life suddenly emerges, quite clearly and concretely : her life. The most essential elements, the meaningful aspects, pervade. Manon introduces personal experiences, which, in part, reach far back into her biography, tells of turning points, painful episodes, and how these shaped her view of life and her own artistic work. “My history is my ground. But I want others to find their own basis, and correspondences within it.” On view along with works from the artist’s earlier work phases are several created specifically for these spaces, especially the large installation *Lachgas* (Laughing Gas) comprising a hospital bed with a red dress draped over it, and lightbulbs that surround the black pedestal like a loge mirror. This work begins where life is at its tipping point, where it becomes fragile and narrow, where the superficial gloss is interwoven with brittle and cold yet deeply human moments, where the fragility of a physical and emotional existence comes to light. Manon shows that this personal “ground,” which she continues to work on and cultivate, forms a common ground, from which the images and sensations are able to grow, which can touch us all in our own existence.

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Quotations

Manon on her artistic career and the *Photo-Performances*

Identity, self-portrayal, and image have been the themes of my work since 1974. *Self-presentation* is a language ... a code, command of which is more or less accomplished. A code is whatever the senses pick up on and emit most instantly, most directly, those first impressions when you meet someone. It includes the pose, facial expressions, gestures, vocabulary, and the choice of words; and also, the styling, the outfit (color, shape, and smell). Secondly, there is all that a person surrounds himself with, from props, to fetishes, to regalia, in fact the whole setting in which he places himself, the backdrops against which he has his life play out. All this has a signal character: it defines a standpoint and also broadcasts it to the world.

Self-portrayal always has something desperate about it. It's a synthesis of longing and grief. A balancing act between the desire for a product that is as perfect as possible and the need to destroy every illusion.

I am simultaneously my own blank canvas and a silver screen for the projections of the people around me. Other people are my mirror, just as I am theirs. Without the gaze of those around us, it's impossible to make one's mark. Playing with one's own reflection is a risky business, a confrontation that can trigger the most violent reactions: from feelings of otherness, to alienation, through to vehement rejection. And especially so in cases where I overcompensate for paranoia and shyness with in-your-face exhibitionism.

My image is the slight facade that holds my psyche together, it is what I stand for, what I am held to be, what people see in me. It raises the question of what it means to exteriorize that inner sense of self one carries within. It speaks of the attempt to align experience of self and a physical statement.

It is also about the very ritual of *giving form* to, which may be connected with feelings of pleasure. I found the *photo-performance* to be an ideal stylistic means to hide myself, while also addressing the exhibitionist elements arising precisely from my desire (or compulsion?) to play hide and seek. And, simultaneously, it allowed me to slip time after time into the role of voyeur, watching my own scenarios.

Actually, I'd like to call myself a *Schaustellerin* (showwoman)—a woman who stages her feelings, situations, and experiences. Using my own body allows me to play a role not only in the equally vital matters of story line, composition, and lighting, but also as a director and a performer in action; which means I am a creator and ultimately also my own end product.

Manon, in 1981, in: *Manon. Identität Selbstdarstellung*. Image Benteli Verlag Bern, 1981, p. 6–7

Manon on the series *La dame au crâne rasé* (The Lady with the Shaved Head, 1977–78)

Shaving my head was a way for me to mark a specific turning point in my life. I was trying to give novel expression to psychological changes. It made sense to me to work with my own body (instead of with canvas or clay.)

It was my attempt to weave into the photos the androgyny of this figure in makeup and yet bald. And I was particularly interested in the surreal aspect, and in the theatrics of the staging of it, which matched how I felt.

To be a hermaphrodite was what I wanted most, at the time. I felt masculine *and* feminine; I wanted to be coquettish and playful as well as rigorous, forceful, strong, and powerful. That's how I wanted to live, and also exactly how I wanted to look.

Manon, in 1984, in *EMMA*, n° 11, 1984, p. 30



Manon on the work series *Elektrokardiogramm 304/303* (1979)

The series ... was created ... in a tiny space, in front of a wall roughly 2 m wide; and the camera, too, was not much further away than that. These minimal means—the wall and I—posed a challenge.

As a backdrop to *Elektrokardiogramm 304/303* I painted the typical clichéd décor in vogue that year, in trompe l'oeil style, on a flat support. This décor changes in the course of the action: elements of it are taken up by the figure and then returned to the wall. Decisive, for me, was the checkerboard motif, a pretty trivial and yet symbolic reminder of how manipulable we humans are. My focus, however, was wholly on the open space around me. Being both the set designer and the director of my own poses gave me the chance to be both the player and the pawn in the game.

Manon, in 1981, in *Manon. Identität Selbstdarstellung Image*, Benteli Verlag Bern, 1981, p. 65

Excerpts from Manon's writings *Federn* (Feathers)

If I were to reach the age my parents did—the statistically foreseen lifespan was not granted them—I would have twelve years left to live.

That is very few, dammit, for someone who learned only late to enjoy life. “Officially” I am said to be a few years younger than according to the date in my passport. A newspaper printed the wrong date of birth for me, actually, early in my artistic career—they hadn't bothered to ask me for details. And ever since, other newspapers have reprinted that date; and likewise, reference works on artists, such as Wikipedia, Sikart, and the like. In this way, I've quite innocently won some time.

I was still young when it happened. There was no reason at all to keep my age secret. But I already had my eyes on the future, and figured that one day I might be glad of those years I “won”; and I still think that today.

Or have I ultimately lost this time? Because I will, after all, live six years fewer than people imagine?

Manon, *Federn*, Édition Patrick Frey, 2020, p. 12

I've been working for years on issues of identity. When I turned forty, I thought I was done with that. Anyone who doesn't know, by that age, who he is, what he wants, how he is seen, and the extent to which his inner self and outer expression correspond isn't quite right in the head—or so I felt.

Well, and now we see these same questions suddenly cropping up again, just a few years later, and indeed for all of us. There are compelling reasons for this. The generation before us, especially the women, lived and aged differently, and died earlier, too, so we have no role models, no examples to follow. We are getting to know ourselves all over again, and continue to actively engage with life. Looking after the grandchildren is no longer the prime concern.

Manon, *Federn*, Édition Patrick Frey, 2020, p. 23

A call from Bern. About showing my video from 1977 again, the one with the title (a quote from Jean Baudrillard) *Der Tod ist unser aller Gigolo* (Death Is Everyone's Gigolo); and there'll be a catalog too, which is why the Kunstmuseum asked me a lot of questions.

The gigolo as a “constant companion” of older women, and often also of older men; in other words, death is a gigolo for all of us. I felt at the time that the Parisian philosopher—a real acrobat with words—had coined an extraordinarily sweet way of putting it. Evidently, death was already on my mind back then.

Manon, *Federn*, Édition Patrick Frey, 2020, p. 41

The sudden memory of a pair of pigeons that used to nest behind a window shutter at my apartment, a converted attic, in the old city center. I can still hear the daily cooing; it was an incredibly erotic sound. Then one day my Siamese cat laid the cock pigeon at my feet: dead.

Manon, *Federn*, Édition Patrick Frey, 2020

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Publications

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Manon, *Feathers*, Edition Patrick Frey, 2020

English / German versions are available at the bookstore of the CCS

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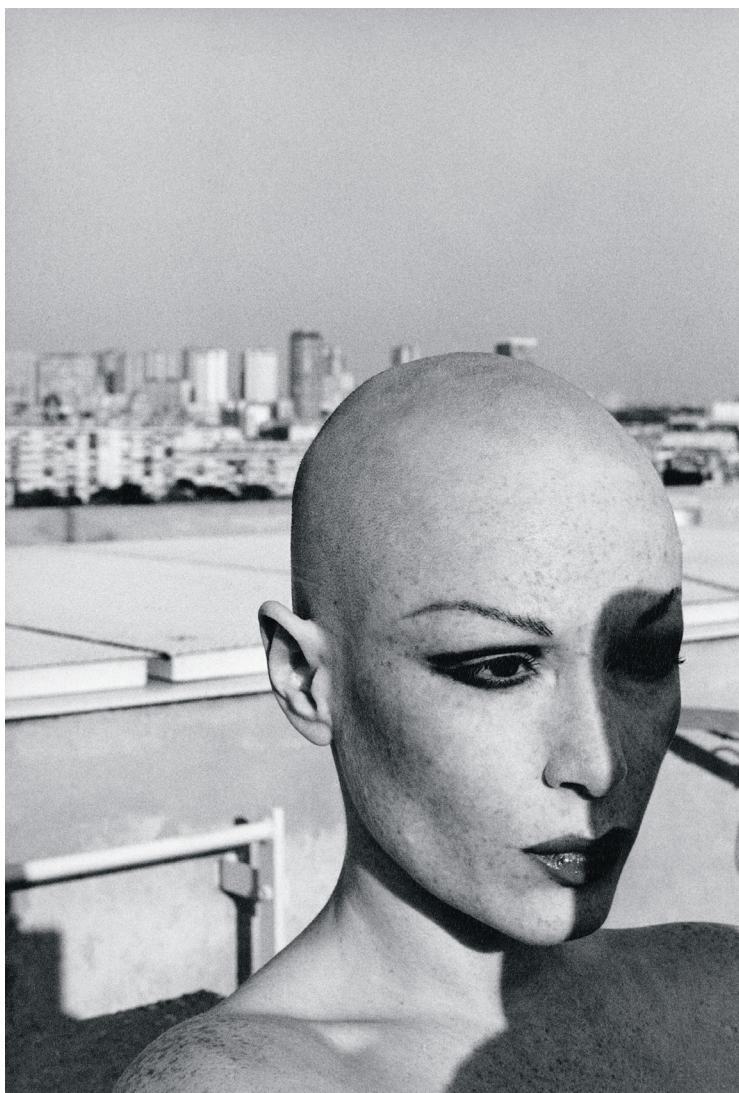
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Visuals for the press



Img 1 : Manon, *La dame au crâne rasé* (The Lady with the Shaved Head), photo series, 1977-78. Courtesy of the artist.



Img 2 : Manon, *La dame au crâne rasé* (The Lady with the Shaved Head), photo series, 1977-78. Courtesy of the artist.

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Visuals for the press



Img 3 : Manon, *Das lachsfarbene Boudoir* (The Salmon-Pink Boudoir), installation, 1974-2018. Courtesy of the artist.



Img 4 : Manon, *Das lachsfarbene Boudoir* (The Salmon-Pink Boudoir), installation, 1974-2018. Courtesy of the artist.



Img 5 : Manon, *Das lachsfarbene Boudoir* (The Salmon-Pink Boudoir), installation, 1974-2018. Courtesy of the artist.

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Visuals for the press



Img 6 : Manon, *Elektrokardiogramm 303/304*, photo series, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.



Img 7 : Manon, *Elektrokardiogramm 303/304*, photo series, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.

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The Centre culturel suisse

The Centre culturel suisse (CCS) aims to promote contemporary Swiss artistic and cultural creation in France through its programming and to encourage exchange between the artistic scenes of the two countries. The Centre culturel suisse is part of the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia.

Practical information

Manon

exhibition from May, 9 to July, 18, 2021

Professional meeting

Friday, May 07, from 10 AM to 1 PM

Saturday, May 08, from 2 to 7 PM

Opening

Depending on the evolution of the governmental measures, the exhibitions will be open to professionals by writing to accueil@ccs-paris.com

Mediation (depending on the health situation)

Curator tour by Claire Hoffmann

Thursday, May 27 at 6:30 PM

20 minutes tours by CCS mediators Anna Terp, Anna L'Hospital, Delphine Melliès and Yael Miller every Saturday and Sunday at 4 PM and on request (accueil@ccs-paris.com)

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exhibitions from Tuesday to Wednesday 1–7 PM

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32 rue des Francs-Bourgeois 75003 Paris

from Tuesday to Friday 10 AM–6 PM

Saturday-Wednesday 1–7 PM

Exhibition: free entrance

Spectacle / concert: 7 € (reduced rate) / 12 €

Projections : 3 €

Lecture / round table: free entrance

The whole programme:

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