

Obselfed

James Bantone, Nina Childress, Chelsea Culprit, Juan Pablo Echeverri, Barbara Hammer, Aurora Király, Hein Koh, Jean-Charles de Quillacq, Elle Pérez, Emilie Pitoiset, Davide Sgambaro, Nora Turato, Dena Yago

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The modern self strives in eternal longing for something. It seeks protection and refuge in its own image, a reflection which feels safe despite its deceit, embodying a doubt that echoes the self's own fraught relationship with its appearance.

One could define current times as the 'era of self-deception' - a subconscious state in which the obsessive striving for perfection, driven by mimetic desires, leads to a form of self-exploitation. Self-deception becomes a cage: any attempt to escape leads miserably into error. It is a quest for a misleading truth, a compulsive endeavour to create for oneself an ultimate, authentic, form of existence.

But - what do we mean when we speak of 'self-obsession'? What remains with one's 'self' and what is, in turn, projected straight back onto others?

Obselfed is an exhibition that brings together artists from different generations who reflect on the concept of the 'self', its cohesion and its fragmentation in an imitation-driven society. The show seeks to explore the boundaries between self-perception and the perception of others, questioning how our personalities construct themselves within elusive social stereotypes and the constant pressure of external judgment. What we derive from these fragmented visions of our 'selves', and what meaning we ascribe to them, is as much a result of an individualistic process as it is the logical outcome of a widespread voyeuristic tendency to 'spy' on others.

The modern self is both a kleptomaniac and a product: the constant need to inflate one's own ego by accumulating 'brand new' personality traits turns into a destructive ideology. The characteristics and peculiarities of the ego become commodities and, in the associated 'commodity logic', any real understanding of the value of the borrowed, appropriated or - if you like - stolen goods, falls by the wayside. It all recedes into mere *vanitas*.

Contemporary individuality dissipates itself, backfiring and turning into projection; its weakness lies in the inability to trust its own gaze. The consistency of its ever-changing nature lies in the delicate harmonies that result from its convergence with the Other.

Obselfed is an attempt to establish a deeper discourse on self-perception. In their works, the invited artists focus on the de- and re- construction of the self, sharing an attitude of resistance towards the anachronistic norms and taboos of our precarious culture.

To engage with the concept of identity today is to enter a vast and complex terrain. How do we present our 'personae' to the outer world? Where do we draw the line between privacy and exposure?

Identity building could be understood as an intrinsically strategic process, in which the larcenous tendencies of individuals seem to be entangled with a shared devotion to anything seemingly out of the ordinary - a need to enhance the oddest characteristics of ourselves at any given time, thus turning their perception upside down. What makes us 'different' no longer isolates us, but rather validates us as part of a community.

It is a fascinating self-affirmation mechanism: what used to be hidden is now exaggeratedly displayed in order to find cultural validation.

In *Obselfed* the 'self' is analysed, fragmented, ironised, elevated, staged, uplifted and disrupted. The invited artists 'activate' a series of characters that raise different social commentaries, fully embracing the paradoxes of contemporary existence. In this framework the entire gallery becomes a stage, developing its narrative from the main room to the office, kitchen, showroom... The presence of works ubiquitously inhabiting the space is thought to convey a feeling of overcrowding, of reiteration. An "obsessive" curatorial environment is created, turning the gallery into an echo chamber where the works resonate in different corners as affirmations of restless states of mind.

Obselfed seeks to dismantle assumptions of our fixed subjectivity and to highlight the contemporary means of cultural self-consumption, emphatically and without naïveté; a quest for authentic individuality in an 'observed' society.

Curated by Marta Santi

Aurora Király (b. 1970, Brăila, Romania; lives and works in Bucharest) approaches the contemporary art field from different perspectives: an artist, initiator of cultural projects, educator.

She is particularly interested in exploring feminist theories in relation with identity-making and the status of women in society. Her works relate to complex connections between events, public and private sphere of experience. In the framework of *Obselfed*, a site specific wall installation is presented, a new configuration of works by Király's series *Melancholia* (1997 – 2000). A fragmented photo-journal in black and white that captures the then-present moment of a passing emotional state of mind. Király in this series plays both roles of the voyeur and the one who is seen, including herself in this continuous relating process.

James Bantone (b. 1992, Geneva; lives and works in Zurich) in his work engages with an ongoing exploration of mimesis and mimetic desire (the non-linear processes by which people subconsciously imitate the desires and distastes of others) through uncanny reproductions of the coded subtleties of gesture as they pertain to gender, sexuality, and race. Bantone creates installations which toy with the poetics of anonymity, ulterior perspective(s), and subjectivity as a means of questioning contemporary markers of Black, queer identity.

His work *Terminal Irony* (2021) plays a key role in *Obselfed* as it strongly captures the troubled relationship between the 'self' and its own representation. The figure's head gets 'eaten alive' by its own reflection, provocatively pushing the boundaries of today's self-perdition.

Nina Childress (b. 1961, Pasadena, USA; lives and works in Paris). Offering a gritty revisiting of the history of portraiture in Western popular culture, her paintings increasingly captured the stereotypes of female representation. For some paintings she creates several versions, oscillating between perfectionism and "badly done", between realism and caricatures; an exercise she deliberately inflicts upon herself in her many self-portraits. Her works investigate the thin line between recognisability and foreignness, paying tribute to the women who have inspired her and reflecting on the pop cultural impact of their 'image'. Childress' subjects are sometimes clear representations of an icon, and sometimes unknown subjects which still have a strange 'familiar feeling', exploring the nature of celebrity, nostalgia, beauty and vulnerability.

Nora Turato (*1991, Zagreb; lives and works in Amsterdam) explores the volatility of language. In her work she translates information absorbed from her daily intake of articles, conversations, subtitles and advertising slogans into linguistic-visual scripts for videos, installations, artist books, murals and spoken word performances, revealing subtle synchronisms in social relations, marketing strategies, consumer behaviour and their own subjectivity. Turato channels the textual hysteria emitted from our smartphones to accentuate the volatility of language when taken out of context. Her work speaks to an age in which language is disconnected from its informative function and words are abstracted from meaning - questioning how it is possible to establish an honest communication with ourselves and others.

Chelsea Culprit (b. 1984 in Paducah, KY; lives and works between Mexico City and New York) explores in her work gender performance in the labour market. Culprit's work entangles representations of the body's capacity for work, play, display, expression, the performed authenticity of identity, and the intractability of freedom and personal bondage. Moving freely between the pictorial imagery of folk art and the materiality of the real world, the artist works variously with painting, neon light, sculptural assemblage, and installation.

The work *Monstruo Hecho de Tierra y Hojas, y El Sol Poniente' / 'Monster Made of Dirt and Leaves, and the Setting Sun* (2023) was produced in Berlin specifically for *Obselfed* and welcomes the viewer with a fragmented representation of a body that floats weightless in the space - an invitation to investigate its essence and structure from different perspectives.

Davide Sgambro (b. 1989 in Padova, Italy; lives and works in Turin). His practice restores irreverent dynamics of resistance in response to the paradoxes of identity and generational stereotypes inside the social order. *FENOMENO (Smiley)* is a laser installation that projects a smiley that spins very slowly on itself. The interaction between space and movement exasperates the symbol represented, seeking the spectator's identification and creating an alienating and hypnotic effect. Inserted in the context of *Obselfed* the Smiley appears as an implacable mask, encapsulating an expression of forced positivity, setting up a necessarily mediated and filtered communication. Through an apparently simple gesture, the installation narrates the bipolar attitudinal behaviour in the late capitalism also called *niceness*.

Elle Pérez (b. 1989, Bronx, NY; lives and works in New York City). Pérez makes photographs imbued with desire and a profound sense of care for their subjects. Their images depict intimate moments and emotional exchanges in visceral detail, often working collaboratively with those they photograph in order to make photographs that reflect on the ever-changing nature of identity. Pérez's pictures depict the traces of queer experiences while also playing with the notion of authenticity by utilising an approach to portrait photography that blurs the lines between traditional documentary, still life, and landscape photography. The works selected for *Obselled* explore the emotional complexity behind an intimate encounter, addressing the struggles that come with an openness to vulnerability.

Jean-Charles de Quillacq (b.1979; lives in Sussac, Limousin and Zürich, Switzerland) develops sets of sculptures that are both conceptual and fetishistic. He works mainly with epoxy resin, which he tirelessly kneads like a "psychological material". He mixes it with other substances like nicotine, urine, hair, literally injecting himself into his work and using it as a form of 'self-existence' beyond his physical persona. Jean-Charles de Quillacq's work, *Tu veux que je te regarde autre chose?*, is presented in the showroom as ubiquitous masculine presence, coexisting with works by female artists only, that specifically reflect on how women are seen and perceived by the male gaze. In this curatorial setting, the male figure looks emptied, almost harmed by its surroundings, thus raising questions on male identity itself and its perception in contemporary society.

Juan Pablo Echeverri (1978-2022) was a renowned contemporary visual artist from Bogotá, Colombia. Working in photography and video, his extensive body of artwork developed from daily self-portraits begun as a teenager into an exploration of how 'other people' construct themselves and are constructed in the sight of others, continually experimenting with his own appearance to reject a flattened, essentialist reading of identity. Obsessed with the performativity of identity, his work queered fantasies of the self, oscillating between the point of view of icon and superfan. Juan Pablo Echeverri's videos included in the framework of *Obselled* are taken by his series *Around the world in 80 Gays*. These video pieces, recorded during his international travels, often involve the artist lip-synching to the most popular song in that time and place: deflating the international artist ego into that of tourist.

Barbara Hammer (1939-2019) was an increasingly influential voice of queer feminism, and a chronicler of women's self-empowerment in the U.S. and many other places around the world. Her documentaries and experimental films are among the earliest and most comprehensive depictions of lesbian identity, love, and sexuality. Today Hammer is considered one of the greatest examples of politically engaged feminist art. Her film *No No Nooky T.V.*, presented in the framework of *Obselled*, addresses the topic of how women view their sexuality versus the way male images of women and sex are perceived. The impact of technology on sexuality and emotion and the sensual self is explored through computer language juxtaposed with everyday colloquial language of sex.

Hein Koh's (b. 1976, Jersey City, NJ; lives and works in Brooklyn, NY) sculptures and paintings are as whimsical as they are witty - raising social commentary through a cast of anthropomorphic fruit and veg. Broccoli, carrots, watermelons and a host of other foods are depicted crying, smoking and drinking to explore mental health in modern society. Gender stereotypes surface throughout Koh's practice, her characters are often feminised and fetishised, wearing fishnets and heels while reclining 'provocatively.' Toying with the idea that women are simultaneously expected to be virtuous and hyper-sexualised, her characters are both wholesomely nutritious and sexually lewd. Her work *The well* is shown to the public for the first time on the occasion of *Obselled*.

Émilie Pitoiset (b. in Noisy Le Grand in 1980; lives and works between Paris and Toulouse) plays with uncanny scenarios that unfold a surrealist visual grammar that is both enigmatic, 'noir' and decadent. In her work, she analyses episodes of popular culture spanning from the medieval period to today, trying to understand the urgency that exists in times of social, economic and political crises to produce new forms of existence through music and dance. The physical body is a recurrent motif in Pitoiset's work. *Insomnia* was produced by the artist specifically for *Obselled* and it is part of a broader series of sculptures in which Pitoiset designed and choreographed a crowd from multicultural pop influences and codes recognisable by clothes and details that she tailor-made. The body is here but the human is broken and absent.

Dena Yago (b. 1988, New York, USA; lives and works in New York, USA) is an artist, writer, and founding member of the trend forecasting group K-HOLE. Dena Yago trains a materialist's eye on the world of contemporary art, exploring cultural phenomena and their related trends and patterns and thus identifying the emerging behaviours and attributes in the process of identity building. The works selected for *Obselled* are part of an older body of work from 2012, a series of 'live portraits' made by covering friends and acquaintances with an interfacing fabric and capturing their details and traits directly on the textile through an oil stick. These portraits float in space yet are caged, unable to move. There for everyone to see yet none to grasp.