

Lesbian Legacies #1:

Grace of Desire - Rebellion, Surrealism, Photography

Claude Cahun, Florence Henri, Marta Hoepffner, Krista Beinstein

Lesbian Legacies presents a three-part exhibition series offering a fascinating perspective on art history. It highlights previously overlooked viewpoints and honors lesbian artists as both artistic and social avant-garde. The opening exhibition, "Grace of Desire" (01.05.-08.06.) offers a reassessment of Surrealism through the lens of queer photographers. The second show, "Archive Affections" (Sept./Oct.), will follow, showcasing contemporary works that challenge and redefine the established art canon. The series will conclude with "The Butch Is Here to Stay", a celebratory homage to "female masculinities."

With different approaches and concise strokes, this trilogy outlines the cultural legacy of lesbian positions from the early 20th-century modernist movement to the present. Through an engaging dialogue between historical and contemporary works, it aims to encourage artists and audiences alike to explore this lesser-known canon and uncover its transformative aesthetic and social potential.

This project responds not only to the notorious cis-male dominance that persists even within the queer art world. It also seeks to advance the delicate renaissance of the often-marginalized self-identification "lesbian" and contribute to strengthening lesbian identities in culture and society. It is a call for discourse, engagement, and action. Now more than ever! At a time when artistic freedom is increasingly under pressure and racist, sexist, and queerphobic tendencies are gaining alarming influence, this exhibition series aims to be more than a space for artistic reflection. It invites visitors to explore the power of queer art as a source of resilience and resistance, sending a strong message for equal rights, social diversity, and artistic independence.

Lesbian Legacies received funding from the Hauptstadtkulturfonds. The project was conceived and curated by Tarik Kentouche and Lorenz Liebig of Kunstraum Scherben along with Dr. Birgit Bosold. She is recognized as one of the most distinguished experts in presenting queer cultural heritage and has curated numerous exhibitions, particularly at the Schwules Museum, Berlin.

Grace of Desire - Rebellion, Surrealism, Photography

The invention of photography in the mid-19th century opened up a new artistic terrain for female and non-binary artists beyond the confines of male-dominated institutions. Denied access to formal art education for much of the time, these artists found in the new medium still free from entrenched gatekeepers a space for creative and professional self-realization. Compact cameras such as the Leica I, which became available in the 1920s, enabled new forms of mobility and spontaneity. Travel and fashion photography, along with the rise of photojournalism, offered a variety of career opportunities.

At the time, Paris was the electrifying center of artistic and cultural revolutions a laboratory of modernity where social libertinism met avant-garde experimentation, drawing together transnational networks. Salons hosted by figures like Gertrude Stein and Natalie Clifford Barney, with their lesbian circles, became vital gathering places for intellectuals and artists from across Europe and the United States. Photographers who would later gain international renown Gisèle Freund, Lisette Model, Germaine Krull, Ilse Bing, and Lee Miller, to name just a few challenged entrenched gender hierarchies and shaped the development of the photographic medium through both technical and aesthetic innovation.

The female nude long off-limits to women in academic training for so-called moral reasons became a site of resistance and self-empowerment. Queer perspectives and surrealist experimentation shattered social conventions and reimagined the visual language of bodies, desire, and freedom.

I' m obsessed with the exception.
I see it as bigger than nature.
It' s all I see.
The rule interests me only for its leftovers
with which I make my swill.

Claude Cahun

Claude Cahun (1894 - 1954), in a uniquely symbiotic collaboration with their partner Marcel Moore (1892 - 1972), challenged the rigid norms of the gender binary and explored new grammars of gender identity. Their body of work defiant self-portraits, enigmatic collages, and uncanny objects—raises questions that remain strikingly relevant to this day. Like many of their contemporaries, Cahun and Moore moved within the Parisian bohème. However, they may have distanced themselves from the bourgeois circles surrounding Barney and Stein, some of whom would later be discredited due to problematic political ties to fascism and collaboration.

Cahun and Moore, by contrast, fused queer self-empowerment with a radical antifascist stance. In response to the growing rise of fascism across Europe, they co-founded the group "Contre-Attaque " in 1935, alongside André Breton and Georges Bataille. The group positioned itself politically against fascism, capitalism, and Stalinist communism. Disillusioned with the defensive posture of the French left, they sought more effective and consciously artistic forms of resistance.

In 1937, Cahun and Moore relocated to the Channel Island of Jersey. When German forces occupied the islands in 1940, they joined the resistance despite Cahun' s particular vulnerability as a person of Jewish descent. They supported prisoners held in a nearby forced labor camp and sought to demoralize the occupiers with their "paper bullets " small, handwritten notes bearing subversive messages from a "soldier without a name. " In 1944, they were arrested by the Gestapo and sentenced to death. Only the war' s end saved them. Cahun, weakened by imprisonment, died in 1954; Moore took her own life in 1972. Their work remained largely forgotten until it was rediscovered during the queer cultural turn of the 1990s. Today, Cahun and Moore are celebrated as icons of modern queer art artists who, in today' s terms, might have identified as non-binary and whose legacy continues to inspire a new generation of artists.

Above all, what I want with photography is to construct
the image as I do with painting.
The volumes, lines, shadow and light
must obey my will and express what
I want them to say. All this must be subject
to the strict control of the composition,
as my aim is not to explain the world or explain my thoughts.

Florence Henri

Florence Henri (1893 - 1982) is considered one of the key figures of the "New Vision" movement. Widely recognized as an artist by her contemporaries during the 1920s and 1930s, she fell into relative obscurity after World War II. Born in New York and raised in Italy, she moved to Berlin in 1912 to study painting. It was there that she met her long-time partner, Margarete Schall (1896 - 1939). In the mid-1920s, she relocated to Paris to continue her studies at the Académie Moderne. Whether she ever met Cahun and Moore is undocumented but not unlikely.

A stay at the Bauhaus Dessau in 1927 marked Henri's turn toward photography, inspired by László and Lucia Moholy-Nagy. Back in Paris, she opened her own photography studio and taught, among others, Gisèle Freund and Lisette Model. In Henri's compositions, traditional ideas of space and perspective dissolve; everyday objects balls, dishes, fruit are transformed into charged elements of a surreal visual language. In doing so, she transposed central impulses of contemporary painting into a photographic medium that had until then been largely documentary.

Especially in her portraits and nudes often featuring female friends Henri made use of mirrors and complex perspectives, subtly exploring the fluidity of desire and identity. Her famous 1928 self-portrait, sometimes ironically referred to as "woman with balls", became an iconic work.

Although Henri lived to see the beginnings of a renewed interest in her work during the 1980s, it is only in more recent years that she has begun to receive the recognition she long deserved.

What matters to me is the visual concretization of a reality that cannot be illustrated through painterly means: light, space, movement.

Marta Hoepffner

Marta Hoepffner (1912 - 2000) was exposed to avantgarde ideas early on, being the niece of Dada co-founder Hugo Ball. Influenced by Dada, the Bauhaus, and her studies with Willi Baumeister (1898 - 1955) at the Frankfurt School of Applied Arts (now the Staedelschule) a leading figure of abstract painting she developed a multifaceted body of work that ranged from surrealist photomontages of the 1930s to light-kinetic objects in the 1960s. Technically accomplished, she mastered a wide array of complex techniques such as solarization, multiple and double exposures with great precision.

When Baumeister was dismissed by the Nazis in 1933 as a "degenerate" artist, Hoepffner also left the Frankfurt school. In the years that followed, commercial commissions in advertising and portrait photography ensured her financial survival and sustained her artistic practice. In 1937, she undertook several study trips to Paris. We don't know whom she met there perhaps Cahun and Moore, or Florence Henri? Who can say?

Her studio was destroyed during the war, but she managed to save much of her work. In 1949, she founded the "Marta Hoepffner Private Photography School" in Hofheim am Taunus together with her sister Madeleine, and from 1962 onward, she ran it in partnership with her life companion, Irm Schoffers (1927 - 2008).

Hoepffner was one of the most prominent names in the experimental photography scene of postwar West Germany, and her school was regarded as one of the country's leading institutions. As both artist and educator, she played a key role in establishing experimental photography as a distinct art form. Since 2002, the city of Hofheim has honored her legacy with the Marta Hoepffner Photography Prize.

I am not just a feminist, I am a gay man, a lesbian, and also a heterosexual man and a heterosexual woman I am everything. [...] I am not a lesbian, I am not gay, I am perverse!
Krista Beinstein

Krista Beinstein (*1955) represents a rebellious contemporary voice. For over forty years, this steadfast non-conformist has explored the subversive potentials of female and lesbian sexuality infused with deep humor, a passion for eccentricity and camp, and an unerring instinct for themes that defy prevailing trends.

In the late 1970s, resistance began to form against what was increasingly perceived as the moralizing direction of second-wave feminism. From within this movement, pornography, sex work, and certain sexual practices such as BDSM, butch-femme erotic roleplay, and even the use of dildos came under sustained attack. The intense disputes between opposing feminist camps became known as the "Sex Wars." These clashes were a key catalyst for the emergence of new "queer" alliances among sexual outsiders united during the AIDS crisis resisting anti-gay resentment within the feminist movement, opposing assimilationist tendencies in the gay and lesbian mainstream, and advocating for a sex-positive culture and a "care revolution" that moved beyond the revival of heteronormative patterns in same-sex spouse-like families.

Krista Beinstein is the grande dame of sex-positive feminism in Germany. In her works, she explores the unrepresentable what we call lust with relentless persistence and the Viennese style of nonchalance: unabashed and seemingly effortless. What we see is often monstrous, marginalized the obscene undersides of more conventional sexual fantasies. Censorship and violence have accompanied her journey. Like messengers bearing unwelcome truths, her works have repeatedly been attacked.

She was certainly not in interwar Paris that much is clear. But she is without doubt a rightful heir to the surrealist rebels. Her multifaceted oeuvre is a lavish visual archive of the lesbian underground a hidden gem long overdue for discovery, much like that of her artistic foremothers.

Birgit Bosold