

Manon

Born in 1946 in Bern, CH. Attended the School of Arts and Crafts in St. Gallen, and then the Theatre and Acting Academy in Zurich; subsequently worked as a stylist, graphic designer, window dresser, and fashion illustrator. Assumed the pseudonym Manon in 1966. Extended stay in Paris from 1977 to 1980, and between 1994 and 1996 in Rome and Genoa. Exhibitions include the retrospective *Manon—Eine Person/Manon—A Person* (2008) at the Helmhaus Zürich and at the Swiss Institute, New York; and *Manon: Hotel Dolores* (2011) at the Kunsthhaus Aarau. Lives and works in Zurich and Glarus, CH.

from the series **Hotel Dolores**, 2008–2011

Zugemauerte Türe

C-print, mounted on aluminum, 189 × 126 cm, Ed. 2/3
Kunstmuseum Bern, Collection Stiftung GegenwART

Rotes Kleid

C-print, mounted on aluminum, 189 × 126 cm, Ed. 2/3
Kunstmuseum Bern, Collection Stiftung GegenwART

Pins über Heizung

C-print, mounted on aluminum, 189 × 126 cm, Ed. 2/3
Kunstmuseum Bern, Collection Stiftung GegenwART

Since the beginning of her artistic activity, Manon has opted to be the subject of her work and created an artificial character out of herself. The early environments are associated with her live performances, in which she sensually stages herself but exaggerates it to such an extent that the staging exposes the voyeuristic desire of the audience. In the performance *Das Ende der Lola Montez* (The end of Lola Montez, Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1975) she sits in an animal cage wearing a low-cut

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black cat suit and is shackled at her neck, hands, and feet. On display as an object of desire in the style of sadomasochism, she fixes her gaze on the audience through her eye mask. In 1979 she says farewell to live performance with *Sentimental Journey* (Galerie de Appel, Amsterdam; later variation *Traps*, 1979, Galerie Ecart, Geneva).

Manon produces her first photographs around 1973/74 in Zurich, creating her first important series, *La Dame au crâne rasé* (Lady with a shaved head, 1977/78), during a stay in Paris. It consists of forty-eight black-and-white photographs—ambivalent erotic self-stagings in which she makes reference to her models from Surrealist photography, such as, for example, Man Ray's pictures of Meret Oppenheim or Claude Cahun's self-portraits.¹ In subsequent photo series up to 1980, she continues to be the sole protagonist, increasingly in roles that do not stage the perfect, covetable body, but in roles such as a cleaning woman or an ill person with an intravenous pole in which she parades the clichés of low social status and affliction (*Die graue Wand oder 36 schlaflose Nächte* [The gray wall or 36 sleepless nights], 1979; *Ball der Einsamkeiten* [The Ball of Loneliness], 1980). In her later photo series, Manon heightens the impression of physical and emotional fragility; impermanence and failure become her preferred themes (*Einst war sie Miss Rimini* [She was once Miss Rimini], 2003, *Borderline*, 2007). Manon's work is to be seen in the context of Body Art as well as in the photographic self-staging of the seventies and eighties (including Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke, Urs Lüthi, Jürgen Klauke), in which the construction of the self is inquired into, in particular with respect to sexual and gender identity.²

Zugemauerte Türe (Bricked-up door) stems from the series *Hotel Dolores* (2008–11), which comprises around 170 works.

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The beginning of her fascination with hotels may be the fact that Manon moved away from home when she was fifteen and substituted a hotel for her familiar parental home as her place of residence.³ In terms of cultural sociology, the hotel is a well-studied object. The hotel has been a site of social transgression since the outset, one in which, for instance, the bourgeoisie and aristocracy can meet on equal footing.⁴ Hence a site that is almost predestined to reconstruct existing identities. For Manon, the abandoned bathing hotels in the city of Baden in Aargau served as a backdrop “in which the artist traced the volatility of our existence with a camera. In the photo series, the derelict premises merge with the artistic staging to become open narratives. The former Verena Hof, Ochsen, and Bären hotel buildings in the bathing district in Baden have been vacant for several years due to a lack of demand. The in part dilapidated buildings testify to the times when Baden was known internationally as a spa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prominent personalities such as William Turner, Gottfried Keller, or Hermann Hesse were counted among the spa guests. In the past decades, its importance as a bathing town increasingly diminished, and some of the hotels closed overnight. Fascinated by the faded grandeur of past times and the special radiance of what are now defunct bathing hotels, Manon chose the buildings as a source of inspiration.”⁵ The artist stayed in the bathing hotels once a week over the course of two years—despite the cold, dust, filth, and lack of electricity—which is why the lighting also presented a challenge. *Zugemauerte Türe* is one of several motifs that focus on nonfunctional architectural elements: cut doorframes, damp masonry, chipped wall paint, yellowed floral wallpaper, dirty floors. *Pins über Heizung* (Pins above radiator) likewise connects grimy installations with a reproduction of Karl

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Stauffer-Bern's *Sitzender Akt* (Seated nude, 1879) pinned to the wall from the collection of the Kunstmuseum Bern.⁶ In *Rotes Kleid* (Red dress), a cabaret dress contrasts with the corner of a room full of debris. Hence what links the motifs selected for the collection in Bern is the fact that the artist does not appear herself. However, the state of the architecture and the references to the female body via visual quote and dress may be read as representative self-portraits: the past splendor of the establishment, the ruinous structures, the contrast between a glamorous then and a today marked by the traces of time that is pointedly staged.

Nina Zimmer

- 1** The only artistic video to date of the same title was made to accompany the photo series and is likewise in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Bern.
- 2** See Christina Horisberger, "Manon" [1998, 2011], in *SIKART: Lexikon zur Kunst in der Schweiz*, accessed July 7, 2017, www.sikart.ch/KuenstlerInnen.aspx?id=4001020&lng=de.
- 3** See *Manon, a Person: A Swiss Pioneer of Body and Performance Art*, exh. cat. Helmhaus Zürich and the Swiss Institute, New York (Zurich, 2008), 262.
- 4** Habbo Knoch, "*Grandhotels*": *Luxusräume und Gesellschaftswandel in New York, London und Berlin um 1900* (Göttingen, 2016). See also Ralf Nestmeyer, *Hotelwelten: Luxus, Liftboys, Literaten* (Stuttgart, 2015).
- 5** *Jahrbuch 9: Aargauer Kunsthaus, Jahresbericht 2011*, Aargauer Kunsthaus and Aargauischer Kunstverein, retrospective *Manon: Hotel Dolores*, curated by Madeleine Schuppli, 18.
- 6** It was simultaneously the invitation to the exhibition "*Verfluchter Kerl!*" *Karl Stauffer-Bern: Maler, Radierer, Plastiker*, Kunstmuseum Bern, August 17–December 2, 2007.

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Pins über Heizung, from the series **Hotel Dolores**, 2008–2011

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Rotes Kleid, from the series **Hotel Dolores**, 2008–2011

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