



Press release Fotomuseum Winterthur, January 2022

Orlando – Based on a Novel by Virginia Woolf

curated by Tilda Swinton

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Virginia Woolf's avant-garde novel *Orlando* is the story of a young noble person who has lived for centuries and has the ability to change gender. Developed by Tilda Swinton, the exhibition of the same name features contemporary artists and photographers whose work explores the main themes of *Orlando*'s story: gender fluidity, the idea of boundless consciousness and the prospect of eternal life.

The 1928 novel *Orlando* tells the story of a young noble person in the age of Queen Elizabeth I who lives for centuries without ageing and has the mysterious ability to switch gender. In 1992, film-maker Sally Potter devised what has become a classic adaptation of the book with actress Tilda Swinton in the title role. Swinton is not alone in being enthralled by Woolf's story, which still holds considerable appeal today.

'I see *Orlando* as a story about the life and development of a human striving to become liberated entirely from the constructs of prescriptive gender or social norms of any kind.'

Tilda Swinton, curator

In the dual role of guest editor and curator, Swinton took up the central concerns of the novel in a special issue she devised for the magazine *Aperture* and in an accompanying exhibition. Her concept brings together the work of eleven artists – a combination of established contemporary positions and images by photographers who have yet to be discovered. The exhibition also includes an introduction developed by Fotomuseum Winterthur introducing the writer Virginia Woolf and film-maker Sally Potter.

The works – some of them conceived especially for the exhibition – challenge dominant power relations and structures as well as heteronormative ideas and the *white* male gaze. They examine the construction of identity and the representation of marginalised communities and alternative life plans. The works do not confine themselves to questions of gender; they are a celebration of creativity, openness, curiosity and the diversity of human existence. The exhibition thus plugs into current sociopolitical debates, while providing insight into a wide range of artistic approaches.



'This exhibition is a salute to limitlessness, and a heartfelt celebration of the fully inclusive and expansive vision of life exemplified by the extraordinary artists collected here.'

Tilda Swinton, curator

Artists and works

For several years, artist and fashion photographer **Collier Schorr** took pictures of Casil McArthur, who was assigned the female gender at birth and transitioned over the course of her project *Untitled (Casil)*. Schorr got to know Casil right at the time the model – who now refers to himself as a 'male princess' – began working as a young man rather than a young woman. According to Schorr, modelling is a matter of projecting fantasies, much like in art and film. While the photographer's fantasies focus on indeterminate bodies, Casil adopts angular, moody poses that give his body space. He felt seen by Schorr, as a queer photographer, and tried out his new look in front of the camera. The result is a series of images – sometimes playful, sometimes melancholic – that blur the boundaries delimiting gender, sexuality and identity.

Rosalynne Blumenstein – who transitioned at 16 and went on to become director of the Gender Identity Project at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center in New York – is muse and mentor to **Zackary Drucker**. For her most recent series of images, the LA-based multimedia artist presented Blumenstein as a role model, a queen – and, above all, as herself. Drucker and Blumenstein are both iconic figures who have done a great deal to promote the visibility and recognition of trans people in the public arena and helped educate and organise within the community.

Photographer and artist **Jamal Nxedlana** is fascinated by the areas of intersection between fashion and street culture in Johannesburg. In 2019, he took pictures of the performance duo FAKA – Fela Gucci and Desire Marea – who fight for the visibility of Black queer identities. In styling FAKA for the shoot, Nxedlana chose clothes that resist any binary assignment and thus represent, in his view, 'a stand against the social ideas of gender, race and class'.

A pioneer of performance, video and multimedia art, **Lynn Hershman Leeson** explores the relationships between technology and society. In 1973, Hershman Leeson began performing as Roberta Breitmore, a persona she sustained for several years. Roberta, her fictional alter ego, rented a flat, took buses, visited a psychiatrist and had her own credit card. This melding of reality and fiction is also thematised in her series *Hero Sandwich*. Here, opposite-sex portraits are overlaid on one another: the replacement of individual identities with artificial personalities subverts any form of categorisation.

For her *Orlando*-inspired portraits, painter and photographer **Mickalene Thomas** draws on the muse-like relationship between Queen Elizabeth I and Orlando and on iconic 19th-century paintings. Presenting her subjects – her own muse and partner Racquel Chevremont and performance artist Zachary Tye Richardson – in colourful sets and



aristocratic costumes, Thomas calls into question the male gaze and gender relations. Thomas's universe gives a vivid presence to figures that in historical terms have been unappreciated in Western painting, pop imagery and cinema.

The exhibition features works by Zackary Drucker, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Jamal Nxedlana, Elle Pérez, Walter Pfeiffer, Sally Potter, Viviane Sassen, Collier Schorr, Mickalene Thomas and Carmen Winant.

The show is accompanied by a range of events hosting guests from the realms of literature, science and the arts.

Information on the museum

Fotomuseum Winterthur is at the forefront of presenting and discussing photography and visual culture. As part of its repertoire of temporary exhibitions devoted to individual artists and group shows, the museum displays works by young photographers as well as those with an established reputation. In addition, it examines photographic phenomena in the context of new technologies and digital media, exposing them to critical scrutiny. A broad range of artistic, applied and cultural forms of photography are explored, with a primary focus on dialogue and the exchange of ideas. The institution is committed to the considered, autonomous and creative use of media. Its collection (which dates back to 1960) has helped to shape the history and narratives of photography as well as our understanding of it as a medium in all its different forms.

Fotomuseum Winterthur was founded in 1993. In 2002, it combined with Fotostiftung Schweiz to create the Fotozentrum – Switzerland's foremost centre for photographic expertise.

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