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www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

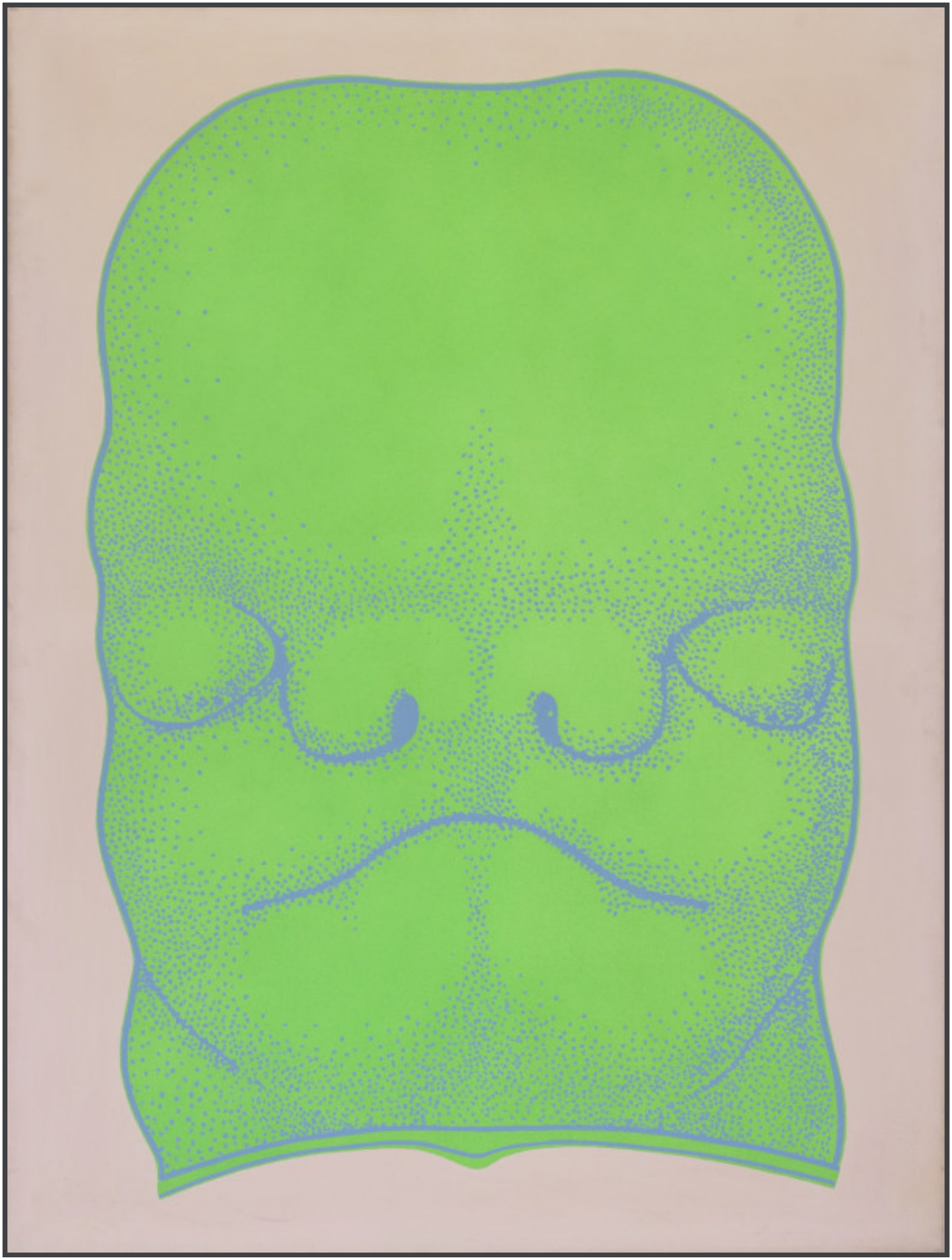


# Human Machines in Times of Covid-19

## Kiki Kogelnik at the Musée des Beaux-Arts La Chaux-de-Fonds

Verena Nora Doerfler

A rush(ing) of images. A sea of hands. And exactly one association: wash – disinfect – do not touch. This here was supposed to have become an ordinary exhibition review. About Kiki Kogelnik at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in La Chaux-de-fonds. First monographic exhibition in Switzerland. Pop Art pioneer. Born in 1935 in Austria, died in 1997 in New York. In whose work the image of hands is something of an artistic signature. But then came the virus and with it the question whether this can work at all: art in times of Covid-19?





Kiki Kogelnik, *Big Science Fiction Baby*, 1967. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 160 x 120.4 cm. © Kiki Kogelnik Foundation. All rights reserved©

Thus, on the first day of a national lockdown in Switzerland, the request to the museum whether it would be possible at short notice to provide the reviewer with a video tour of the exhibition? And the encouragingly swift by the curators, David Lemaire and Marie Gaitzsch, to make such an improvised digital format available. A format that, in most cases with an art educational dialog function, has become standard for both national and international art institutions.

The in this case deliberate choice of a «basic» setting – video footage of the exhibition without commentary – proved not entirely interference-resistant, however: the sense of being stuck in a huge bubble, with no chance of being heard, let alone seen. And the constant impulse to interject: «Stop – don't move – please pan left again ....» But the anonymous human being behind the smartphone camera simply doesn't hear you. His breathing, his footsteps are all that can be heard; occasionally, his baseball cap is reflected in the picture frames. And the few buttons available on your home computer for a video recording: «next,» «previous,» «pause.» Over time, he and I mutate into a machine «dividuum,» one with inner conflicts. He seems to be in a hurry – he is familiar with the exhibition and aware of approximately 100 works he still has to film. I, on the other hand, don't know the exhibition. Not even the museum which is not altogether unimportant for the contextualization of art and for which the editors were so full of praise. I have trouble following him and, pause button or not, feel rushed. Not exactly favorable conditions for art and its viewing.
Still, what we do here is, paradoxically, meaningful. Context-based, you would like to think. As if planned well in advance: their view of the exhibition, my view of the laptop, and in between the eye of the cellphone camera. A technologically triply mediated gaze regime, in the context, mind you, of an artistic practice in which the «human machine» or at least the technological «intersection» of human plays an important, if not central role.



Kiki Kogelnik, *LES CYBORGS NE SONT PAS RESPECTEUSES*, installation view, 2020. © Musée des beaux-arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds. Photo: Charlène Mamie

*LES CYBORGS NE SONT PAS RESPECTEUSES* (CYBORGS ARE NOT RESPECTFUL): The title of the exhibition draws on Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. Cyborgs are hailed by Haraway as «resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity.»[1 [/b-n-l/mensch-maschinen-in-zeiten-von-covid-19-en-us/pdf#A1]] Not that far-fetched for an artistic practice like Kiki Kogelnik's. The focus of this retrospective is, as stated in the exhibition text, on the topical issue of the «body in social, medical and technological terms» and a related «ambivalence of progress». Very prophetic, you suddenly realize: an (a)social and (anti-)capitalist virus of pandemic proportions. Global interlinkage as well as isolation. The power of medicine and science at their temporarily lethal limits. «Human machines» working from home due to lockdown and «zooming» through the world of work. And in the

midst of it: Kiki Kogelnik. An artist (still) underappreciated who, from the 1960s on and in a way very much her own, pursued a feminist agenda in the world of «male»-dominated Pop-Art. Distinctive, because Kogelnik's brand of feminism lacks the ostentatious hints and is not so much discourse- as practice-oriented. Yet it also put a self-staging «femininity» center stage that ran diametrically – and thus all the more ostentatiously – counter to the hegemonic guiding principles of what in the 1960s was a shadowy female existence. And: an artistic practice of spraying, painting, screen printing, producing sculptures or vinyl cutouts with an aesthetically appealing, if quite bold and catchy farsightedness regarding us and our present.



Kiki Kogelnik, *Womans Lib*, 1971, silkscreen on paper, 76 x 57 cm. © Kiki Kogelnik Foundation. All rights reserved

*Womans Lib* at the very beginning of the exhibition exemplarily documents Kogelnik's attitude: an oversized pair of scissors as a «[proto-feminist] recoding of a cutting tool associated with women.»[2] [/b-n-l/mensch-maschinen-in-zeiten-von-covid-19-en-us/pdf#A2] . Right between Kogelnik's legs, the location where, to this day, violent sexual fantasies like to stray. Kogelnik herself styled as a punk dominatrix/amazon: strong, independent, uninhibited by conventions. And yet, interestingly, Kogelnik's feminism is said to not have

been «genuine» at all, or at least not explicitly displayed. As she herself once stated: «My feminist contribution is my work itself and my lifestyle, more so than the artistic content.»[3] [/b-n-l/mensch-maschinen-in-zeiten-von-covid-19-en-us/pdf#A3]



Kiki Kogelnick, *Self Portrait*, 1964. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 203 x 274 cm. Collection Mono Schwarz-Kogelnik © Kiki Kogelnik Foundation. All rights reserved

*Self Portrait* as yet another example of such artistic, feminist/non-feminist content: very bright colors on a large-scale canvas. A bomb – a classic image for an artist socialized in the era of the «Cold War» and symbolically operating ideological battles. Added to this, as another key subject in Kogelnik's vocabulary of forms, are body silhouettes (seemingly) cut up with scissors, which question the construct of (embodied) identity. «The zigzag of the scissors cut as a gesture of giving her male Pop colleagues and their love of red-painted mouths, pin-ups, celebrities and hard-working little housewives the finger.»[4] [/b-n-l/mensch-maschinen-in-zeiten-von-covid-19-en-us/pdf#A4].

As the setting of the machine-based, externally controlled exhibition viewing remains in itself fragile, your gaze during the tour ends up relying mainly on the iconography of the known, meaning on the works in the artist's oeuvre that have achieved canonical status. Like the large-than-life *Skull* composed of multicolored vinyl cutouts.



Kiki Kogelnik, *Skull*, ca. 1970. Vinyl hanging, 226 x 122 cm. © Kiki Kogelnik Foundation. All rights reserved

Death, suppressed by (alleged) modernist progress and visualized in this and many other of Kogelnik’s works as a reminiscence and reminder of the fragility of life, does make you

shudder a bit in the current situation. And relax. Rarely has death been catapulted so colorfully and brightly and cheerfully into the horizon of our present.



Kiki Kogelnik, *LES CYBORGS NE SONT PAS RESPECTEUSES*, installation view, 2020. © Musée des beaux-arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds. Photo: Gaspard Gigon

Then, in the gallery featuring Kogelnik's «X-ray art» – large-scale images of partially X-rayed humanoids and «nascent» embryos – my «alter ego» and I eventually arrive at a kind of routine in viewing the art on site. We are familiar with and attuned to one another in using the equipment we hold between our hands. «My paintings are mainly about representing an artificial human being,»[5] [/b-n-l/mensch-maschinen-in-zeiten-von-covid-19-en-us/pdf#A5] Kogelnik is said to have once described the essence of her work. Long before the idea of «artificial intelligence» (AI) became the revenant of a scientificity seemingly reinventing itself and being showered with government funds.

Kogelnik was interested in the «made-ness of man,»[6] [/b-n-l/mensch-maschinen-in-zeiten-von-covid-19-en-us/pdf#A6]of fragmented and fragmenting constructions of identity, the hopes and fears of incipient fantasies of cybernetic omnipotence. In other words, everything that today threatens to drop onto our feet with such viral vehemence. In La Chaux-de-Fonds the curators seem to have found a very solid and coherent curatorial framework for Kogelnik's extensive and bizarrely topical range of subjects, a framework reflected above all in the classical dramaturgy of an exhibition structured by creative periods as well as key themes.



Kiki Kogelnik, *Look Again*, 1979. Serigraph, 66.4 x 87.5 cm. © Kiki Kogelnik Foundation. All rights reserved



Kiki Kogelnik, *Untitled (Hanging)*, 1970. Vinyl film and chrome-plated clothes hanger, 142 x 46 x 14 cm.
© Kiki Kogelnik Foundation. All rights reserved

One of the last galleries also reveals the «classical diligence» applied to tracing the strands of Kogelnik's artistic works, starting with Kogelnik's visual criticism, from the 1970s on, of female figures and ads in shallowness-prone glossy magazines (as in *Look Again*, 1979) that, given the «sexiness» of the female figures they show, illustrate how critical parody and affirming imitation are often very close to one another. To the painterly imagery of Kogelnik's by now iconic *Hangings*, vinyl cutouts that trace the contours of bodies colorfully, limply and motionlessly hanging from clothes hangers. As if one could hang one's «self» in

the wardrobe of history .... Taken together with Kogelnik's technology- and progress-embracing interest in space travel and her farsighted focus on the blending of man and machine, the exhibition as a whole thus paints a picture of an artist who sought to transcend the restrictive boundaries of the «old» by turning to the «new.» In doing so, she could rely – very much in line with contemporary narratives of a «beautiful» postmodern feminism – on these in her Pop Art (self-)stagings ....

... I am thinking when suddenly a young woman appears in the video who seems to know – and be looking for – the human being behind the cellphone camera. A crack in the matrix. As if Kogelnik's young self had momentarily snuck into the present. My baseball-capped avatar abruptly pans away, ending their recording. I close my laptop. Outside the window this strange quiet still prevails. «You're thrown back onto yourself with such force,» I remember a colleague lamenting who, due to the pandemic, is zooming through her workaday life and team conferences. And I start asking myself whether the same applies to art in times of Covid-19? Whether there's something missing, perhaps, in the flat digital «space» between 0 and 1 – except maybe in the case of digital art per se? Especially in light of an ongoing crisis in the course of which the world seems to narrow and technological, global progress appears to turn right before our eyes and by far more visibly into its unsocial, unjust and unpredictable opposite. Isn't there something like spatial resonance missing there, a sense of subjective, embodied situatedness? Not only in the transversal exchange relations between art and its viewers, but also in the power-suffused historical fabric of this art and its institutions.

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[1] Donna Hathaway, *Manifestly Haraway,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, p. 9.
[2]Angela Stief, «Touch! Attraktion und Repulsion in Kiki Kogelniks Malerei der 1960er Jahre,» in: *Kiki Kogelnik: I Have Seen the Future, ed. Florian Waldvogel,* exh. cat. Kunstverein Hamburg, Cologne: Snoeck, 2012, p. 70.
[3]Susanne Längle, «Die vielen Gesichter der Kiki K.,» in: *Kiki Kogelnik. Retrospektive,* ed. Hans-Peter Wipplinger, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Krems, Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2013, p. 25.
[4]Stief, 2012 (as in n. 3), 69.
[5]Ibid., p. 66.
[6]Ibid., p. 71.
[7]See Florian Waldvogel, «All dreams are in us prophetic,» in: Waldvogel 2012 (as in n. 2), p. 37.

VERENA NORA DOERFLER

Verena Nora Doerfler ist Kulturwissenschaftlerin und freie Autorin, lebt und arbeitet in Berlin und Zürich, und promoviert seit 2012 zu Hochstapeleien und Geschlecht.