

PRESS RELEASE

CHRISTIANE PESCHEK

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OPENING RECEPTION

FRIDAY, 31 MAY, 12–6PM

“The entire world has been turned into a well-fitted mask for the human face,” reflects theorist Carl Olsson in his essay “Peak Face” (2023). “The world is a Facehugger.” From the Cambrian Explosion to deepfakes, Olson analyses the history and seeming end of the face as the ultimate interface, given the ease with which this platform can be co-opted, manipulated and artficed through digital technologies. From this POV, it’s as if the ultimate paradigm of our individuality—our face—has been stripped of any currency at all. But perhaps there’s something else of value in the anonymous swarm intelligence of a post-facial future?

At ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY in London, Austrian artist Christiane Peschek presents *THE GIRLS CLUB*, a suite of digitally-manipulated selfies that reflect the uncanny powers of a femme face that refuses recognition. Thirteen meticulously-crafted hand-dyed silk works mounted to aluminum frames are enshrined by a black vinyl wall installation that bears the phrase “*THE GIRLS CLUB*”. The images, which are all characterized by deep-fried edits to a series of self-portraits taken on the artist’s iPhone, collapse the face into an abstract field of material data, one that can refuse the superstructures of capital and identity that augured it.

“Using silk as a carrier for my images is a reference to the human skin,” Peschek explains in an interview. “Its fragile and delicate characteristic is a beautiful contrast to the hard surface of the touchscreen.” With a background in advertising, the artist has a keen understanding of material-driven affect, even while her work takes aim at larger social, cultural, and technological systems that underpin the consumption of images online. With *THE GIRLS CLUB*, an ongoing project since 2019, Peschek focuses on the eternal quest for self-presentation within virtual social environments. Drawing on photo editing and retouching tools, Peschek merges her own selfies with an ever-expanding archive of imagery culled from various social media feeds.

Like many synthetic intelligence models including the generative adversarial networks (GANs) utilised to generate deepfakes—a digitally manipulated media that replaces one person with the likeness of another—Peschek’s girls are iterative, emerging from a source image that has been modified hundreds of times. The source image in question is the selfie; yet blurred beyond recognition, identity fractures and splits into multitudes. In Peschek’s hands, the selfie becomes less a projection of the self than an abstracted “internet gaze” and a critique of the algorithmic beauty systems that undergird it.

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Aesthetically, Peschek's work is something of a paradox: the soft and gauzy imagery belies the aggressive bordering on obsessive treatment of the image, often spawned from pushing an editing tool to its extreme by reapplying it up to a hundred times. In this militant spiral, a popular blurring filter—typically used to conceal blemishes and other imperfections—first enhances the beauty of the face before annihilating it altogether in a wash of abstraction. Here faces are atmospheres, split into their melted composite parts. Mouths appear as gargantuan grimacing slashes: Cheshire cat-like, sinister. Eyes are always shut and often flattened. Very rarely does a baseball hat or some other accessory enter the scene. The rest of the face evades perception, becoming landscape.

Enshrined by these digitally-rendered mutations and variations of the self, Peschek's girls club is partially a series of self-portraits; equally depersonalised, the girl in question here is also all of us. This ideology echoes the argument of theorist Alex Quicho, whose essay "Everyone is a girl online" charts a new politics of "being girl". Here, girl as collective consciousness (colloquially known as 'girlswarm') is both a recognition of the interlocking axes of power, desire, and capital laminated onto all of us (cis men, too, you're also girls), and a polyvocal war cry for something beyond.

Within her practice, Peschek talks about the phenomenon of "becoming image"—this notion follows Quicho's girlstack, where one may sub for the techno-armededdon in order to collapse the system from inside it. Returning to Olsson's peak face, the author suggests that perhaps "defacing" the world may be a chance to rescue ourselves from the financialised weapon suite of the facial platform. Likewise, with the infinitely expanding swarm intelligence of Peschek's *THE GIRLS CLUB*—flattened icons who evade their own humanness as much as they reject the financialization of e-femininity—we see a similar spirit of refusal.

"Soon, we might be able to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, earnestly, 'Do we really need this?'" Olsson proclaims his vision of a post-facial future. Peschek's girls critically anticipate that mirror stage; these "supra-individual" portraits refuse the notion of the bounded self as much as they reject the genre of portraiture, ultimately delivering an exit strategy from the superstructures that got us here in the first place. To become unrecognisable is also to become ungovernable; to become girl, in Peschek's distorted photographic image, is to become an edgeless swarm that critiques its confines while imagining worlds beyond representation.

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BIOGRAPHY

Christiane Peschek is an artist broadly interested in questions of identity and aesthetics online. Since 1996, she has maintained an archive of selfies that are directly utilised in her work and can be understood as the backbone of her creative practice.

Spanning painting, printmaking, sculpture, and multisensory installation, Peschek's practice skewers the historical weight of the portrait genre, subjecting it to the ebbs and flows of digital production, optimization, and curation of the self as the ultimate currency. Drawing on digital retouching and editing tools, as well as the intimacy of the interface, Peschek's practice critiques the fantasy of these online representations while also speculating on a world where the commercialisation of online identity can be eluded through the glitch and blur.

Born in 1984, the artist studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. She has shown internationally at galleries and institutions such as ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY, Kunstmuseum Celle, the NRW Forum Düsseldorf, Museum MARTA, U10 Belgrade, UNSEEN Amsterdam, Salzburger Kunstverein and Benaki Museum Athens.

Peschek was awarded with several international prizes such as the UNSEEN Tesla Art Trail award, honor price of Emergentes DST and the state scholarship for photography by the Austrian Government.

Her works are found in collections such as ING DiBa Art Collection, the Museum of Modern Art Salzburg, the Artothek at Belvedere21 Vienna and the Kupferstichkabinett Vienna.

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Opening Hours: Wednesday — Saturday, 12 — 6pm

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