

Seeing Out Loud: Jerry Saltz on the Best Booth at the Independent Art Fair

By Jerry Saltz



The mysterious woman known only as Margret.

If all songs are love songs, then maybe all stories of obsession are stories of love and doom, from *Sentimental Education* and *Lolita* to *Horse Crazy* and *Moby-Dick*. I saw two magnificent tales of photographic obsession this week at the Susanne Zander Gallery booth at the Independent, one of three art fairs I visited in four days. They're in a compact four-person show titled "artist unknown," and it contains only work created by anonymous makers. Sinking into it, letting myself be taken up in its intractable magic I remembered the Velvet Underground's lyric in "Some Kind of Love": "No kinds of love are better than others." Whoever the anonymous makers were, regardless of their motivations and compulsions, I saw art driven by inner necessity, elaborate imagination filled with pathos, intensity, something pitiable but incredibly celebratory.

First, there are eight pictures out of an incredible cache of 380 small-scaled color photos, mostly Polaroids, found in a suitcase in Germany. All we know is that they were made between January 1988 and July 1995 by a Hamburg cross-dresser who called himself Martina Kubelk. In all of them we see Martina home alone in her parlor, kitchen, or boudoir. In four of the images she's dressed as a middle-class hausfrau, a woman of about 50. She wears grandmother dresses, sweaters, skirts, micromesh black nylon stockings. Nothing that sexy. Always posing demurely, never in any sensational or exhibitionist way, she wears cheap wigs and unfashionable glasses, holds a timer, and looks directly into the camera.

We can't help but notice her oversized head and almost anorexic mien. This makes the pictures deeply disjunctive, a dance between fantasy, love, pain, and absurdity. In one picture of Martina in a floral silk blouse, aqua skirt, and white pumps, we can see something like family pictures visible in the background. A life that probably none of these people knows about unfolds before us, an enigmatic crack in a crystalline life. Against this picture of someone you'd pass in the market or waiting for a bus comes the Mr. Hyde side of Martina: a series of photos of her in black bras and panties, garter-belts and latex lingerie.

The pictures are not sordid or perverse. They're images of need, expression, a someone prying herself open. It's like those online pics of teenage girls posing in their daily outfits just to see how they look. Here, we see Martina seeing how she'd look to someone who might desire her simply as she is. If there's any perversion to these pictures it's the stricture against someone simply being able to dress the way they like. Perhaps this is why all of Martina's pictures were taken in tightly enclosed private spaces. Compositionally and psychologically, they are Cindy Sherman unveiling her many selves, by way of Malick Sidibé, the Malian photographer who recorded the people around him posed against makeshift portable backdrops, and Morton Bartlett, who between 1936 and 1963 made anatomically correct dolls of pubescent girls, sewed wardrobes, and photographed them in either Shirley Temple poses or ballerinas.

After this dip into the deep end of need, you can go even deeper, as you move over to a grouping of vintage prints from a man we know only as Gunther K. They are from a cache of 350 similar images and documents all recording an affair that took place in 1969 and 1970 in Köln between Gunter, who was 36, and his secretary Margret, who was 24. As with Martina, there's nothing sexual or sordid going on in these images. Nothing smutty or very seductive. Here, we're in the presence of two detached people, isolated in their own world in private and public. It's almost an image of an otherwise empty place — the way the world can sometimes seem when we're in the grip of an obsessive affair like this.

In the pictures we see only Margret, the object of Gunter's fascination and compulsion. He records her sitting in beds and cars, getting dressed, washing up, smoking, putting on makeup, at tourist attractions, in restaurants. The color is washed out, that of another time; the settings are secluded in some middle Alpine landscape, along roads, in fake Tudor hotels. One tantalizing image of Margret in lace panties and bra comes as close as we get to seeing Gunter: His reflection is there in the bathroom mirror behind her, but it's obscured by the blast of a camera flash. Her always perfect, carefully quaffed strawberry-blonde bouffant, simple white dresses, flowered robes, and vacant expressions create an incredible counterpart to his almost scientific indexing of her every move.

This counterbalance shatters in the accompanying paraphernalia collected by Gunter. He kept an index of almost everything that he and Margret did and had an obsession with anything she touched. We see clippings of her fingernails and pubic hair, discarded birth-control dispensers, and hotel bills. He notes their lovemaking in exacting detail, recording duration of sexual acts, angles of penetration, how he cupped her breast, the way she washed herself after sex. It's not smut but more like science. (And it's in German.) It's all just facts that add up to the doom that awaits these lovers. We learn at the end only that Margret became pregnant and then got an abortion, and the affair seems to fade after that. The last entries record how they lay in beds just holding one another. This is what makes these two unknown artists great: complex visions replete with an abject, demonic need, psychosexual drive, humor, and excruciating consciousnesses enslaved to love.

Many of us are dragged down and blown out by art fairs. This week alone, New York saw more than a half-dozen of them. I had enough trouble just looking at three. But even though they're guided by finance and networking, they can still be places where — if you really look and stay open — you can be caught off guard and discover deeper meaning. I left the Independent reminded that we should never count anything out, even if we think we're above it all.

The Independent art fair is at 548 West 22nd Street through Sunday, March 9.